



the
forbidden
series

after hours lectures

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

KIMBERLY KNIGHT
RACHEL LYN ADAMS

AFTER HOURS LECTURES

A MM STUDENT/PROFESSOR ROMANCE

FORBIDDEN SERIES

BOOK 1

KIMBERLY KNIGHT
RACHEL LYN ADAMS



CONTENTS

Books Written by Kimberly Knight and Rachel Lyn Adams

Note From The Authors

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Books Written by Kimberly Knight and Rachel Lyn Adams

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About The Authors

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AFTER HOURS LECTURES

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**BOOKS WRITTEN BY KIMBERLY KNIGHT
AND RACHEL LYN ADAMS**

Off the Field Duet – A MM Baseball Romance

Dibs - A MM Friends to Lovers Romance Standalone

After Hours Lectures - A MM Student Professor Romance

Secrets We Fight - A MM Bodyguard Romance

Hooking the Captain - A MM Hockey Romance

NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

Dear Readers,

AHL makes several references to one of the character's childhood. While this book contains all the necessary details for Tyler and Hayden's story, you can learn more about Tyler's relationship with his parents by reading *Dibs*, which is Tyler's father, Gage, and Chase's story.

Happy reading,



TYLER

THE RIDESHARE PULLED UP TO THE SIGMA EPSILON HOUSE where I lived on Greek Row near Hawkins University, and a sense of dread washed over me as I spotted the all too familiar bright red BMW parked on the street. Ford, my ex, was home and the memory of him dumping me over the phone an hour before I boarded my flight home to San Diego for the holidays replayed in my mind.

“I don’t think things are going to work out between us.”

“You’re breaking up with me?” I asked, trying to keep my voice low so I wouldn’t draw the attention of the other travelers waiting at the gate.

“I guess I am.”

“You guess?”

“We want different things, Tyler. I told you I wasn’t sure I was ready to announce to the world I was dating a guy.”

“I’m not asking you to do that.” I sighed. Hiding my relationship wasn’t something I wanted to do. I’d come out when I was fourteen. Still, I wouldn’t push someone to share their sexuality with others if they weren’t ready.

“Things were supposed to just be a bit of fun,” he replied, ignoring what I’d said. “Then it became more serious than I wanted.”

Was he kidding me? He'd been the one to pull me into his room during one of our parties. He'd made the first move, shocking the hell out of me. I'd assumed it would be a one-time deal, but he did the same thing the following night, and before I knew it, we were sneaking into each other's rooms several times a week.

"Ford—"

"Look, I gotta go. The guys and I are going out tonight before I leave tomorrow."

"Wait," I begged, but the call disconnected before I could say anything else.

For the last three weeks, I'd made a conscious effort to push everything related to Ford out of my mind and focused on having a great time with my family and catching up with friends. It wasn't as if I spent my break nursing a broken heart. Sure, I liked him and enjoyed spending the last three months getting to know him better, but I didn't see our relationship as serious as he seemed to believe I had. However, returning to school meant I could no longer ignore the fact we were going to continue living together for the next five months.

"Thanks, man," I said to the driver, then grabbed my suitcase and duffle bag and headed up the walkway.

Silence greeted me when I pushed open the door to the three-story, colonial-style party house. It was only Thursday, and the spring semester didn't start until Monday, so besides Ford and a couple of the guys whose families lived locally, I assumed the rest of my housemates wouldn't be home until Sunday night. They were most likely trying to squeeze in as much fun as they could before the stress of the new classes began.

Trying to avoid Ford at all costs, I hurried up the stairs to my room on the second floor and tossed my bags onto the full-size bed.

"Hey, welcome home," a friendly voice called from behind me.

Turning my head, I saw Fallon, one of the local guys and our fraternity president, standing in my doorway. He and I met on our first day of class three and a half years ago and had been best friends ever since. “Thanks. How was your break?”

“The usual.” He sighed. “Family get-togethers filled with heated political debates.” Fallon was born into a family of politicians and lawyers, so while it was probably normal for him, it sounded awful to me.

“They don’t chill out during the holidays?”

He chuckled. “Hell no, it’s their favorite pastime.”

“I don’t know how you do it.”

“When you grow up a certain way, you get used to it. Besides, I’m not missing out on home-cooked meals because my family is annoying. I’m going to have to hit the gym extra hard after all that food.” He patted his stomach. When Fallon said “home-cooked meals,” he didn’t mean food made by his mom or dad. No, his family had a personal chef, maid, driver, all of that shit since they were what some would call “old money.” On top of that his dad was a U.S. Senator representing Massachusetts and there was talk he might run for president in the next election.

“You’re ridiculous.” I shook my head and laughed. He was a member of the rowing team, so overindulging in a few meals would likely have little impact on the six-pack I’d seen him sporting when we’d hung out by the pool.

He walked across the room and plopped down on my bed as I picked up a stack of shirts and moved them to my dresser. Thankfully I’d done my laundry before leaving San Diego, so I didn’t need to worry about it before school started back up.

“We’re all hitting up Ernie’s later. You and Ford wanna come?” he asked.

I took a deep breath. “Ford broke up with me.”

Fallon winced. “Shit. You just got home. When did that happen?”

“Right before I boarded my flight to San Diego.”

Fallon was the only person who knew Ford and I had been dating. In fact, he was the only one who knew Ford was bi because he walked in on us once. Ford freaked out, despite Fallon promising he wouldn't say anything. That should have been my first clue that things probably wouldn't work out between us, considering I wasn't in the closet like Ford.

“Was it because he was scared people would find out?”

“Probably, but all he told me was we wanted different things.”

“Sorry, man. I'm guessing things are going to be awkward for a bit. Did you two talk at all while you were in San Diego?”

I shook my head. “Didn't see the point. I'm not going to beg someone to talk things over if they're already checked out. It seems I don't have much luck in the relationship department,” I joked, even though it was mostly true. Besides Ford, I'd dated Quinn, my high school boyfriend, for three years, and Jordan for a bit during my sophomore year of college. Everyone else had been a brief fling at most.

“Not sure I believe that, but maybe you're on to something. College isn't the time to get tied down.”

“You're right.”

He smirked. “I usually am.”

My phone dinged with a text notification, and Fallon pushed himself off my bed. “I'll let you get settled in. Let me know if you decide to go out with us tonight.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, pulling my phone from my pocket. I smiled as I read the message sent to our family chat.

Dad #2: We just boarded our flight. Love you, guys

Chase, my stepdad (although I didn't usually refer to him as my stepdad), and my father were headed to Turks and Caicos for their anniversary. Their travel plans were the reason I hadn't waited until Sunday to come back to school.

Me: Love you guys too. Have fun!

I shoved my phone back into my pocket and continued to unpack.

DESPITE THE FIVE-AND-A-HALF-HOUR FLIGHT FROM SAN DIEGO to Boston and the thirty-minute-long car ride home, I lay in my bed, wide awake and bored out of my mind. Fallon had texted me on his way out an hour ago to say Ford was joining them. Even with that knowledge, I regretted not going. It was stupid for me to let any potential issues with an ex keep me from hanging out with my fraternity brothers.

Fallon's words from before filtered through my mind. *"College isn't the time to get tied down."*

I only had a semester left before graduation. No reason to get attached to someone when I didn't plan to stick around. And what better way to move past a breakup than to hook up with someone else?

With my decision made, I looked up the address for Chrome, a gay nightclub I'd heard about but hadn't visited since it was thirty minutes away in the city.

After I took a quick shower, I pulled on a black T-shirt and black jeans, and grabbed my gray bomber jacket to wear over the top. I'd debated shaving, but with a glance in the mirror, I was happy with my heavy stubble and decided to leave it. Pleased with my look for the night, I ordered a car and headed out.

ONCE THE BOUNCER CHECKED MY ID, I ENTERED THE nightclub. The thumping music and bright lights filled the room with a vibrant energy. I weaved through the throng of people on my way to the bar and thought to myself that it was

too bad Fallon wasn't with me because this place was totally his scene.

Since leaving for college over four years ago, I'd had gone through quite the transformation from a quiet, moody teenager to an outgoing and carefree adult who enjoyed searching for the occasional hook up. However, I didn't usually go out somewhere by myself to do it. During my first year at Hawkins U, I'd been surprised by how easy it was to find guys at parties looking to have a good time or to experiment. So being alone caused an equal mix of excitement and nervousness to course through me as I scanned the crowd, looking for someone who caught my eye. It was more packed than I expected for a Thursday night, which, lucky for me, meant more options.

One of the bartenders approached, and he took a moment to check me out before giving me a coy smile and asking, "What can I get you tonight?"

"Whiskey sour." I usually drank beer, since that was what we had at the frat house, but considering I was in a swanky nightclub, I felt the need to order something a little more sophisticated.

"You got it," he said with a wink.

It took less than a minute for him to place my drink in front of me. "If you need anything, my name's Perry," he stated, before moving to take another order. He was cute with his blond hair and tall, lean build, and appeared to have a relaxed vibe. If he'd been my type, I would have tried to flirt with him and maybe ask when he got off. Since he wasn't, I turned my attention back to the crowd.

As I took a sip of my drink, my gaze stopped on a guy walking toward the bar. This guy? Definitely hot. He wore a cream-colored cable-knit sweater with blue jeans, and both fit him perfectly, highlighting his muscular form. He appeared to have a couple of inches on my six-foot frame, which was always a plus in my mind.

He found an open spot to slip into a few seats down from me, and Perry appeared in front of him a couple of seconds

later. I couldn't blame him. If I were working at the bar, I would have fought off my coworkers to be the one to take his order.

I looked away and took another swallow of my drink while plotting how I should make my approach. When I glanced at him again, he looked my way at the same time. Our eyes met, and he gave me a small smile, but Perry interrupted the moment when he delivered the stranger's drink.

After a bit, the two men sitting beside me got up and headed toward the dance floor. From the corner of my eye, I watched the mystery guy throw back the rest of his drink and make his way toward me with confident strides.

"Mind if I sit here?" he asked, his smile from earlier returning to his face. Up close, he looked a few years older than me. Maybe twenty-seven or twenty-eight. That worked, since my track record with guys my age wasn't great.

"Not at all." I finished my drink and placed it on the wood top.

"Can I buy you another one?" he asked, eyeing my empty glass.

"Sure."

"What are you having?"

"Whiskey sour."

He signaled to Perry and ordered us each another. Our bartender flashed me a wink again and got to pouring.

"Seems you're popular tonight."

I shrugged. "Pretty sure he's aiming for a good tip."

"Maybe not the best course of action when he's flirting with the guy I'm buying drinks for." Tall, dark and handsome smirked. Damn, that smirk was sexy.

While I was busy taking in the gorgeous man sitting next to me, I noticed he had the most stunning eyes I'd ever seen. Even in the dim nightclub, his light green irises sparkled, and I

was so distracted by them, I didn't realize Perry had delivered our drinks until Mr. Bright Eyes lifted his glass.

"Thanks." I held up my own drink and tapped his with mine.

"You're welcome." He leaned a little closer to me and lowered his voice. "It's the least I could do for the guy who caught my attention the moment I walked in."

I grinned. "Flattery. That must mean you want something."

"Oh, I definitely want something."

"You seem pretty sure of yourself, but I need to warn you—winning me over will take more than one little compliment."

"I bought you a drink, too," he teased.

"Hmm. I guess you're off to a pretty good start then."

"Finish your drink, and I'll show you what else I'm good at."

I polished off my drink quickly. Maybe I should have made him work a little harder, but what was the point? It was clear we had gone to Chrome with the same plan. Why draw things out when we both knew how the night would end?

As soon as the glass touched the bar, he grabbed my hand and led me out of the club. It had started to snow while I'd been inside, and I felt myself shiver, missing the mild California winter I had enjoyed over the last three weeks.

Mr. Bright Eyes wrapped an arm around me, and I nuzzled into his side. *Damn, he smelled good.* Like sandalwood with a hint of citrus.

"I'll order us a car. I don't live too far from here. Unless you'd rather go back to your place?"

I shook my head. "Your place is good."

Minutes later, we were sitting in the backseat of a Chevy Tahoe. When the vehicle pulled away from the curb, my mystery man leaned over and pressed his lips to mine. I'd had one-night stands before, but never with someone I hadn't

exchanged names with. For a moment, I was tempted to ask him, but something stopped me because the idea of an anonymous hookup had my blood rushing to my dick, and all I could focus on was the way his mouth felt against mine.

Once the rideshare pulled up to a one-story house, we slipped out of the backseat. Mr. Bright Eyes grasped my hand and led me toward the front door. My heart raced with anticipation with what was about to happen when we got inside.

After using the keypad to unlock his door, we stepped over the threshold. The house was dark except for the streetlights streaming through the large window near the door, and after he flicked on a light, he kicked the door closed and pushed me against it, distracting me with an all-consuming kiss.

His tongue tangled with mine while I cupped the side of his face, enjoying the prickle of the rough brown hair covering his cheeks. A few moments later, he slowly moved us across the room. I kept my eyes closed, trusting him to guide me where he wanted us to go. With a couple more steps, my back was against the wall, and my gorgeous stranger moved his lips from mine and worked his way down my throat. My hands gripped the sides of his head as his teeth bit my neck gently, sending a shiver down my spine, and I moaned softly.

His mouth moved back to mine, and I trailed my hands down to his waist, pulling him closer to me until I could feel his stiff dick pressing into my hip.

“Let’s move this to my bedroom,” he suggested.

I nodded enthusiastically and followed him to a room down the hall. We walked through his doorway, and Mr. Bright Eyes pushed me further into the room until we stood beside his king-sized bed. He leaned over to turn on the small bedside lamp, casting a soft glow over the room.

“You have too many clothes on,” he protested.

“Maybe you should do something about that.”

The heat in his eyes made my knees weak.

With a swift move, he pulled my jacket off and ripped my shirt over my head, tossing it to the floor. “That’s a little better.”

Anxious to get him undressed as well, I repeated his move and revealed his perfectly toned body. I traced my fingertips up and down his broad chest, feeling his muscles move and contract as I explored his body. His skin felt warm as my hands traveled down his stomach, the ridges of his muscles rippling beneath my touch.

We both kicked off our shoes and quickly removed the rest of our clothes. Once we were both naked, I couldn’t help but look him up and down. Everything about him was solid and hard, including his long, thick erection.

“Like what you see?” He quirked a brow, and I realized I was still staring at his dick.

“Mhmm,” I replied, not ashamed of my blatant perusal of his body.

He got a wicked gleam in his eyes. “Get on the bed then.”

I followed his instruction without hesitation.

While I made myself comfortable, he fumbled around in his nightstand and tossed a bottle of lube and a condom onto the bed beside me.

Laying down so we were facing each other, he claimed my mouth again. Our hands explored each other’s bodies and our hard cocks rubbed together, mimicking the way our tongues swirled together in our mouths.

“I want you,” I moaned, breaking our kiss.

The instant those words left my lips, I felt his hands leave my body and he reached behind me. A second later, he opened the cap on the bottle and squirted some into his hand.

“Is this what you want?” His lubed finger brushed over my hole.

“Please,” I whimpered.

He smirked as he circled my rim and slid a finger deep inside me.

“Oh, shit,” I groaned against his shoulder.

He moved his finger in and out for a minute before adding a second digit, and I rocked my hips back encouraging him to give me more.

“That’s it,” he hummed. “I want you nice and relaxed before I fuck you.”

My breaths came in quick short pants while I focused on the sensation of his fingers working me over. “I’m ready.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Hurry.” I didn’t give a damn how eager I sounded. At that moment, I wanted nothing more than for him to sink his dick into me.

Seeming pleased with my response, he guided me onto my back and grabbed the condom from above my head. I watched as he ripped the wrapper open and rolled the rubber down his thick shaft. He snagged the lube and knelt between my spread legs, lifting me until my ass rested against his thighs and my feet were firmly planted on the mattress. He poured more lube onto his hand and stroked his latex-covered cock several times, coating it until it was good and slick.

Leaning forward, he kissed me deeply, lining up his hard length with my puckered rim. He slowly pushed inside, giving my tight asshole time to accommodate his generous girth. Once my body relaxed, I was able to take him all the way.

“Oh my god,” I gasped as he began to move.

He was gentle at first, but when I began to grind against him, he slammed into me harder and deeper. The sounds of our heavy breathing echoed throughout his room.

He looked down between us where we were connected. “It’s so fucking hot watching my dick stretch you.”

My hands fisted his comforter as the tip of his shaft hit my prostate and my hardening cock bobbed with each drive of his hips.

“Holy shit!” I cried out.

“You like that?” His thrusts quickened.

“Hell yes.” I reached down and wrapped my palm around my shaft, knowing it would only take a few tugs for me to detonate.

“Let me do that.” He pushed my hand away, and began to stroke me, his movements slowing but still going deep and hitting me in the right spot.

“I’m so close,” I panted.

“Good. Let me watch you come.”

My entire body tensed with his words, and it didn’t take long before I shot my cum all over my stomach. The overpowering orgasm caused my ass to squeeze him tight, and within seconds, his climax had him shouting incoherently as he filled the condom with his release.

We paused to catch our breaths before he withdrew his still twitching dick from inside me.

“I’m going to go clean up,” he said and climbed off the bed.

My head was spinning from the unexpected intensity between us. But, despite how I was feeling, I understood a guy didn’t bring another man home without knowing his name if he was looking for anything more than a one-night stand, and I wasn’t going to embarrass myself by sticking around. So, while he went to the bathroom, I grabbed my phone, ordered a rideshare, and got dressed. He returned as I sat on the edge of the mattress, tying my shoes.

Clearly, I was leaving, so it didn’t surprise me when he asked, “Can I order you a car?”

“I’ve already got one on the way.” Once I was sure I had everything, I walked toward his living room and took in his well decorated home with rich leathers, real plants, and a ton of photos on the wall. “Did you take these?” I asked, looking at a city view of Paris with the Eiffel Tower in the distance.

“I did.”

“Nice. Well, see ya.” I opened the front door, hoping my car would arrive at any minute as powdery snow fell from the sky.

Our eyes locked as though we both wanted to say something, but instead, Mr. Bright Eyes smiled awkwardly as I stepped off his front steps and then he shut the door.

As I waited outside for the ride I had ordered, a slight pang of disappointment set in that I didn't get his name.

HAYDEN

“YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND.”

“Help me understand.” I pleaded.

“I can’t.”

“Please. Just love me,” I begged.

“I do love you.”

“But not enough.”

“I need to go.”

“No!” I reached for him, our fingers brushing as he stepped off the steps, and in an instant, he was gone.

Back inside, I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV.

“Breaking news outside of Boston. Bruins captain, Jonah Walsh involved in a fatal car accident—”

“I’m sorry.”

My head snapped quickly to the doorway, where a bloody Jonah stood in the entry. I whispered, “What?”

“I’m sorry,” he said again, a drop of blood dripping off his head.

I shot upright, my breaths coming in long gasps as I struggled to wake up. Sweat coated my entire body and my

heart raced as I realized I was having a nightmare—the same one I'd had for the last three years since my boyfriend Jonah died in a car accident after he stormed out of my house because we'd gotten in a fight.

Peering across the room to the window, I saw through the slits on the side of the curtains that it was still dark outside. A glance at my alarm clock on the nightstand confirmed it was 4:34 a.m., and I had about thirty minutes to either try to get more sleep or start my morning.

Since it was the first day of the spring semester, I chose to get up. I had a busy class ahead of me. As I made my way to my en-suite, a piece of string on the floor caught my eye on my bedroom floor.

Picking it up, I realized it wasn't just a string, but a friendship bracelet made of embroidery thread. I hadn't seen such a thing since I was in middle school twenty-plus years ago, so how the hell did it get into my house? And then it hit me.

The guy from Thursday night.

The one I had brought back to my place and failed to exchange names or any other info with.

The one with the perfect mouth and tight hole that made my dick hard just thinking about him.

The one who left with none of the awkward bullshit that could come with one-night stands.

The one I wouldn't mind seeing again.

And maybe that was why I didn't throw the chevron-patterned bracelet into the garbage. Instead, I walked back over to my bed and put it into the top drawer of my nightstand. I didn't know why, because what grown-ass man wore a friendship bracelet? Then again, I knew nothing about him other than he hadn't been much shorter than my six-foot-two stature, had silky, finger-length dark brown hair that I had tugged on more than once, piercing blue eyes, and a five-o'clock shadow.

It wasn't like me to think about my one-night stands after they left my house, but this guy—something drew me to him. If I saw him again at Chrome, I wouldn't mind bringing him back to my place again.

The thought made me pause. I hadn't wanted more than one night with someone since Jonah. I tried to tell myself it was because I kept so busy with teaching and working as a photojournalist, that I only had time for casual hookups. The truth was, I wasn't ready to know any new guy's name. To go on first dates and learn how they took their coffee. I'd had all of that with Jonah and it had ended in an instant, leaving my heart broken and never feeling whole again.

Taking a deep breath, I shuffled to the bathroom and got ready for work.

PULLING MY WHITE INFINITI QX60 INTO MY PARKING SPACE AT Hawkins University, I grabbed my briefcase and camera bag and stepped out of the SUV. HU was my alma mater, and when I decided I wanted to have more of a nine-to-five job instead of covering multiple sports teams that kept me away from home, I'd applied. I hadn't been offered a position until after Jonah died. Getting the teaching job was supposed to let me be at home with him every night after he retired, but after a lot of consideration, I still decided to take the job. It was for one class a week and it still worked with my schedule. Plus, I found out I loved teaching. Since I had no one at home waiting for me, I chose to continue working for my family's news agency.

Just as I started across the parking lot, Charlotte Ross, a fellow professor, parked her Mercedes in her spot. I waited a few moments for her to grab her belongings and then she quickly made her way toward me.

“Good morning,” she sang.

“You're chipper for the first day of the spring semester.”

We fell into step.

“Yeah, well, getting engaged over winter break will do that to a woman.”

We both stopped walking and turned to each other as she held out her left hand; the massive rock on her finger sparkled in the early morning sunlight.

“Oh wow. Congrats.”

We hugged briefly.

“Thank you. I’m still in shock.”

“Really? You and Mitch have been together for how many years?” I had only been teaching for two and a half years and they had been together before I met Charlotte.

“It’s been four, but I just had no idea he would do it over break.”

We fell into step again.

“How did he do it? Tell me everything.”

“Well.” She beamed as she looked over at me. “Last week we drove up to Maine for a few nights and rented a cozy cottage on Lake Arrowhead. We both wanted to relax and prepare ourselves for the upcoming semester.”

I nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. While I didn’t go on a getaway, I spent most of my free time during my break taking day trips to shoot photos. Photography was a way for me to show how I viewed the world, to capture a moment and relive it over and over. To bask in the beauty of a sunset or the way the sun made the snow glisten at just the right angle. Taking pictures was truly my passion, and I loved that I could teach it, as well as make a living working as a photojournalist.

“We took an hour drive to Fort Williams Park to see the lighthouse. He somehow got us an exclusive tour and at the top, he dropped to one knee and asked me to be his wife.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. I’m really happy for you.”

“Thanks. What about you? How was your break?” She took a sip of her coffee.

“It was good. Stayed busy with *The Hub* and covered the Celtics games.” I shot more than basketball, but not in the winter months. Hockey was my favorite sport, but ever since Jonah passed away, I couldn’t bear to attend or watch a Bruins game and had asked someone else to cover them. I missed going, though, and had friends who played—guys Jonah had introduced me to—but it was still raw and the thought of not seeing him on the ice hurt.

Charlotte and I walked into Miller Hall and made our way to the department where our offices were located.

“Congrats again,” I said to her as I came to my door.

“Thanks. Expect an invitation soon. We’re having an engagement party in a few weeks.”

I smiled warmly. “Can’t wait.”

Opening the door, I walked inside and noticed my aide sitting at her desk. “Good morning, Isabelle. How was your break?” I set my bags down on my desk.

Isabelle was a graduate student and I’d met her briefly the last day of the previous semester since she was going to be my TA. “It was great, Professor Foster. How was yours?”

“Went by too fast.”

“Tell me about it. I overslept and haven’t had any coffee yet.”

I slid my wallet out of the back pocket of my slacks and handed her a twenty. “Why don’t you get us both a cup before class starts?”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I need another one to get me through today’s agenda.”

The first day of class was always exhausting since I had to give an intro on myself, what the course would entail, how to turn in their assignments, and make sure they had DSLR cameras to use. If they didn’t, the school would provide them with one.

I longed for the days when photography wasn't computerized, back when instead of a digital single-lens reflex camera, it was a single lens that used 35mm film. Both of my parents were into photography and had met while working at *The Hub Tribune*, which my great-great-grandfather started in 1872. My parents now owned and ran the business and, since I practically had a camera in my hand from birth, I had spent many hours in the dark room at the news agency. I missed going into the red-hued room, smelling the pungent metallic odor, and using an enlarger to transpose my image from film to photo paper. Developing film took more technique, but learning how to frame the right shot would never change, and that was the first thing I taught my students.

Isabelle left, and I checked my email and prepared for class. Once she returned, she handed me my cup of joe and after taking a sip, I said, "If you can just count the number of students we have, that should be fine for attendance. I'll know if people attend based on the weekly quizzes I give at the start of class."

"Sure thing. Not a problem."

We both made our way to the classroom, sipping our coffees, hoping for a little more energy. I kicked myself for not getting the extra half hour of sleep I'd missed out on this morning. But just like all the other mornings when I'd woken up sweat-coated and rattled over the last three years, I would make it through.

A few students were already in their seats when I strolled in and set my stuff down on the table at the front of the room. As I was unpacking my camera, a few more people entered and I glanced up, only to meet the stare of the friendship bracelet guy from Chrome.

The room seemed to sway slightly as our eyes locked and his smile fell from his face. His steps faltered and the person he had walked in with nudged his shoulder. Our gaze broke and his attention turned back to the other student. His friend pointed to where he wanted to sit and the pair made their way to an open table with two seats.

My pulse raced as I tried to comprehend what was happening. The man from Thursday night was my student? Was it the facial hair he sported that made him seem older because I would have never pegged him as being in college? Or was it because we'd met in a club a good distance away from campus that I never assumed I would run into someone who went to Hawkins University? Whatever the reason, I knew I'd be fucked if anyone from HU found out. It didn't matter that our hookup had happened before the semester started. The fact was, he was my student, and I'd been intimate with him.

Fuck.

Trying to calm my nerves, I chugged the last of my beverage, only to realize that coffee wouldn't do it. I needed alcohol, but that would have to wait. The class was two and a half hours long and, since it was the first day of the semester, my office hours were scheduled to start right after class to answer any questions students had.

I felt Friendship Bracelet Guy's eyes on me as I prepared to start class, and I realized now he knew my name. Not wanting to flat-out ask him for his and only his, I went to where Isabelle sat in the back of the class and asked, "Can you make a seating chart for today and get everyone's name?" She blinked. It was the exact opposite of what I'd told her before leaving my office, but I had to know his name and couldn't wait a few weeks until I learned it based on a photo he took. Given I'd caught Isabelle off guard, I joked, "I changed my mind because I'm getting older and my memory isn't as sharp as it used to be. Having a seating chart will help."

"Will they be required to stay in those seats all semester?" she inquired.

People were creatures of habit and usually sat in the same seat each week if it was open. I didn't require them to have partners to shoot with or buddies to complete assignments with for a group project, but I needed to know this guy's name. I could be *that* teacher who made each one introduce themselves, but that wasn't part of my syllabus or plan for the day. We didn't have time for it anyway as I had too much to

cover to get them up to speed and explain their first homework task.

“Yeah. Let’s do that. Make it easier on this old man.” I was only thirty-three and far from being old, but I had to keep up the ruse.

She giggled. “You’re not old.”

“Tell that to my back.” I winked and immediately her cheeks flushed. Shit. I wasn’t flirting, but I didn’t go around campus talking about my sexuality, so she might have gotten the wrong impression. I quickly turned to the class and spoke as I made my way to the front. “All right, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Photojournalism 155. I’m Professor Hayden Foster. During the semester, you’ll learn technical fundamentals of photography and photojournalism. I’ve been working as a sports photographer for over a decade, but have been taking photos basically since I could crawl.” I grinned at my joke as a few people chuckled. “My TA, Isabelle, is sending around a seating chart. The seat you’re in will be yours for the semester. If you want to change, I suggest you do it now.”

My gaze met Friendship Bracelet Guy’s and neither one of us smiled or had any sort of facial expression. My heart was racing and even though he was in my class and it was against school policy, a part of me still wanted our one night to turn into more.

Except, I couldn’t let that happen because I loved teaching my craft. I could only hope seeing this man weekly wasn’t going to be an issue.

TYLER

MR. BRIGHT EYES—OR RATHER PROFESSOR HAYDEN FOSTER, as he introduced himself—stood in front of the class, going over our first assignment. I should have been listening, but I couldn't stop the images of our night together from playing on repeat in my head. The way his soft lips felt as he kissed me on the street while we waited for our ride. How his hard body lined up perfectly with mine as he pinned me against his living room wall. The way his body jerked as he came.

My dick strained against my zipper, and I shifted in my seat while trying to conjure up thoughts about anything besides how much I wanted another night with my *hot* professor. I'd never felt the need to seek out one of my hookups for a repeat before, but I'd spent the entire weekend thinking about our time together and couldn't shake the overwhelming desire to get back in his bed.

“Tyler?” Fallon whispered, bringing me out of my daze.

“Uh ... What?”

“I asked if you wanted to work on our assignments together, but you seem out of it. You okay?”

“I'm good.”

“Okay. So, about the assignment ...”

I had no idea what we needed to do, but teaming up with Fallon was a given since we were friends and lived in the same house. “Yeah, of course. We’ll work on it this afternoon.”

When Professor Foster dismissed the class, I considered hanging back to try to speak with him, but several other students rushed to the front before I had the chance.

“Where are you headed next?” Fallon asked, lifting his bag onto his shoulder.

“I’ve got a music class in an hour and a half, so I’m going to grab some coffee first. How about you?” I glanced up and noticed a line had formed to talk to Professor Foster.

“I’ve got a poli-sci class. Should have known better than to pick back-to-back classes on Monday mornings.” He looked at his phone. “In fact, I’m going to be late if I don’t get a move on it.”

As Fallon and I headed toward the door, I peeked over my shoulder and my gaze connected with Professor Foster’s before he turned away. Just that split second of attention had me remembering how good it had felt when I had been his sole focus in bed. As I walked across campus, I couldn’t help but wonder if either of us would be brave enough to address the night we’d spent together.

If we’d been in any other situation, I wouldn’t think twice about asking him out, but him being my professor completely changed the game. That didn’t mean I didn’t still want him. If anything, it sort of made it hotter ... *forbidden*. And despite him being off-limits, I knew I wouldn’t deny him if he invited me back to his bed.

AFTER MY MUSIC INDUSTRY ANALYSIS CLASS, I HEADED BACK to the chapter house. My stomach rumbled, so I dropped my bag on the kitchen counter and searched the fridge for a quick bite before settling in to get started on some class reading.

As I heated up the plate of chicken and rice that our house chef had saved for those of us who weren't home at lunch time, my phone vibrated in my pocket. A huge grin spread across my face when I grabbed it and saw the text.

J Mom: Hope you had a good first day. It's been too quiet around here since you and your brothers went back to school.

J Mom, also known as my stepdad's ex-wife Jamie, wasn't my biological mom or even my stepmother, but she was the one I claimed. She had been married to Chase before he and my dad got together and was the mom to Jase and Cammie, my step-siblings. She welcomed me and my brother, Dylan, into her family with open arms. And when things went to shit with our birth mother, she was happy to fill that role for us. Our family dynamic was unconventional, to say the least, but having Jamie as part of my life meant the world to me.

Me: I'm sure Cammie is keeping you busy.

J Mom: True. That doesn't mean I don't miss you.

Me: I miss you too.

The hardest part about going to school on the East Coast was living so far away from my family. My brothers attended UCLA, so they could drive down to San Diego often, though I knew their visits weren't regular enough for my parents' liking. After graduation, I planned to move back to California and find a job as a music journalist. That way, I could live my dream and be close to my loved ones.

J Mom: I was also texting to make sure you're still coming home for spring break. I'm planning Cammie's Sweet Sixteen, and I know she'll want her brothers there.

Absently, I rubbed my wrist where the matching bracelet my siblings and I wore usually sat. Cammie had received a bunch of supplies one year for Christmas and made us matching ones that contained each of our favorite colors: pink for her, purple for Jase, red for Dylan, and teal for me. When I

woke up on Friday, I noticed it was missing. I'd searched my room, but hadn't been able to find it, and wondered if I'd somehow lost it in San Diego.

The microwave beeped. I assured Jamie I wouldn't miss my sister's party and promised to chat with her soon, before putting my phone down and grabbing my food.

Judging by how quiet the house was, everyone appeared to still be in class or in their rooms, which meant I could work downstairs without distraction.

An hour later, my eyes started to glaze over, and I closed my laptop. While putting my things into my bag, I heard the door open.

"Hey," Fallon greeted as he rounded the corner with Ford a step behind him. "You done with classes for the day?"

"Yeah, I only have two on Mondays. What about you guys?" I glanced at Ford, who avoided my gaze by staring out the window instead.

"I'm done for the day too," Fallon replied. "Ford and I were going to meet up with some of my teammates from the rowing team at Marco's for some pizza. You want to go with us?"

"I ... ah ..." I peeked at Ford who was shooting daggers at Fallon. Was he pissed at my friend for asking me to join? Well, fuck him. Even though I'd just eaten an hour before, I wasn't going to pass up pizza. "Sure."

"Actually, I just remembered I've got some reading to do. I'll catch up with you later," Ford said, but aimed his words at Fallon before leaving.

"Well, that was uncomfortable," Fallon muttered.

I shrugged. "I don't know what to do. It's going to become awkward for everybody if he can't even hang out with the group just because I'm there."

"Yeah," Fallon agreed. "On the way here, he asked if he could change his committee assignment for the charity softball game."

Every spring, Sigma Epsilon hosted a charity event. This year, we were organizing a celebrity softball game to benefit various LGBTQ+ youth programs, which had been a surprise—albeit a great one—when it had been suggested, since most of my fraternity brothers were straight. Ford and I, along with a couple other guys, were part of the committee responsible for finding the celebrities to participate in our event.

“It’s fine. Preston and I have started working on stuff already. I’m sure we have it covered.”

“Okay. Let me know if you need anything. I can always assign someone else,” our frat president said.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. It’s part of the job.” He smiled. “Now, do you want to chat about our photojournalism assignment?”

“Sure.”

Fallon and I spent the next half hour finding images online and writing short paragraphs about what drew us to them. I found one of the Eiffel Tower at night and had a hard time coming up with something other than it reminded me of my professor’s house—the house where I had experienced the best sex ever.

IT WAS FRIDAY, AND A CROWD HAD DESCENDED ON THE SIGMA House for our traditional spring semester kickoff party. While several parties could be found every Friday night on Greek Row, the houses took turns hosting the bigger ones.

“You want a beer?” Preston asked when I stepped into the kitchen, where we had set up a couple of kegs.

“Is that a serious question?” I grinned.

He handed over a red cup filled to the brim. “What about you?” Preston shook an empty cup, and I turned to see Ford a few feet behind me.

He stood between a couple of girls from our sister sorority, his arms draped across both of their shoulders. Between using Emily and Lia for balance and his glassy eyes, it was clear he was already several drinks in.

“Fill ‘er up,” Ford shouted back.

Preston passed the cup to me. “Hand that to him.”

“Here you go.” I did as asked.

“Thanks, man.” Apparently, drunk Ford didn’t have a problem talking to me.

Since our awkward encounter in the kitchen a few days prior, we’d both kept to ourselves. The couple times I had seen him in the house, he had either made it a point to ignore me or leave. I didn’t know why he continued to avoid me. It wasn’t as if I was trying to push him for any sort of explanation or anything. We’d broken up and that was that.

“No problem. Do you ladies want anything?”

“A beer would be great,” Lia replied.

“Me too,” Emily called out.

I lifted my hand in the air, indicating to Preston that I needed two more drinks.

Once everyone had a beer, Ford leaned into Emily and said, “Let’s go dance.”

“Want to join them?” Lia asked me.

Lia and I had been friends for a few months, and saw each other at parties often, so dancing together wasn’t a big deal.

“Sure.” I grabbed her hand and followed behind Ford and Emily.

We stayed on the makeshift dance floor for a few songs. Just two people having a good time. At least, we were until Ford decided to speak.

“She’s not really your type,” he mouthed off.

“Dude.” I glared at him.

“What?” He shrugged. “She’s not.”

My sexuality wasn't a secret, and I was pretty sure Lia knew I was gay. Not responding to Ford, I pulled her toward the other side of the dance floor. "Sorry about that. Ford's drunk."

"Clearly, but it's not really a good enough excuse for him to be a jerk, though."

"You're not wrong."

She looked at her friend, who was still dancing with him. "Emily likes him for some reason. I don't get it."

Unfortunately, I got it. When I first met Ford during rush week our freshman year, I had found him quite attractive with his perfectly styled chestnut hair and emerald eyes. I had no clue he was bi since I only saw him with women over the next three years. During that time, we'd become close friends and he was always a blast to hang out with. So needless to say, I'd been caught off guard when he made the first move last fall. As we spent more time together, it felt as though whatever was happening between us was more than just physical. We'd stay up late at night talking about our goals and what we each planned to do after we graduated. And while I never saw us as something super serious, I had enjoyed our few months together and could understand why Emily did too.

"Lia!" a couple of girls shouted from the kitchen as soon as the song ended. "Come do shots with us."

She stepped back out of my arms. "Looks like I'm being summoned."

I chuckled. "Have fun."

Looking around, I spotted Fallon across the room chatting with a few Delta members. I headed in their direction, handing out some high-fives and bro hugs along the way.

"You look annoyed," Fallon said quietly as I stepped next to him.

"Ford is being a dick," I grumbled, ensuring only he could hear me. "Said some shit about Lia that he shouldn't have."

"Do I need to step in?"

I shook my head. “Nah. I’ll handle it.”

Fallon got pulled back into the conversation with the other guys while I scanned the room once again. When my eyes passed over the crowd still dancing, I noticed Ford staring in my direction. *Seriously, what was his deal?*

The second he realized I saw him, he bent down and crashed his lips against Emily’s. I rolled my eyes. If he thought his actions would make me jealous, he had another thing coming. All he managed to do was make me think about another set of lips I wished I had on mine.

Despite not seeing Professor Foster all week, I wondered if he was at Chrome looking to hook up with someone again. A pang of jealousy hit me and before I realized it, I stood and grabbed my phone.

“I’m going to go get some air,” I told Fallon.

He nodded, and I made my way to the front door. When I got outside, I pulled up the rideshare app and put in the address for the nightclub.

IT WAS A LITTLE BEFORE MIDNIGHT WHEN MY RIDE DROPPED ME off. It took me twenty minutes to get through the line, and, not surprisingly, Chrome was even more packed than the last time I was here.

While walking through the club, I searched for the man I wanted to see, but didn’t spot him anywhere. I made my way to the bar and found an open seat and rushed to it.

“Nice to see you back.” The bartender from last time stood in front of me. “What can I get you?”

Since I had started the night with beer, I decided to stick with that. “I’ll take a Sam Adams.”

He grabbed a glass and pulled the handle to pour my drink.

“You here alone, or is that handsome man from the other night with you?”

It seemed like I wasn't the only one who my professor had made an impression on, and the thought bothered me more than it should have. Of course, I had no claim on him, but since I was at the club looking for him, I didn't want anyone getting in my way.

"It's just me tonight."

"Interesting." He winked and then walked away to take another order.

I thought about moving to the other side of the bar where another bartender worked, so he wouldn't get the idea that I reciprocated his interest, but I stayed put because my seat provided an excellent view of the door.

Two beers and an hour later, there was still no sign of my teacher. Knowing he was unlikely to show up this close to last call, I downed the rest of my drink and headed out.

HAYDEN

WHEN I HAD STARTED TEACHING, I HADN'T BEEN THIS nervous or anxious, or *scared*.

That first day at Hawkins U, my nerves had run high because I had been worried about stumbling over my words, forgetting something basic like putting a memory card into the camera, or that class would be boring, and my students wouldn't learn anything.

What I felt when I woke up this Monday morning was a different kind of fear—it was trepidation. What had happened with Tyler Statler could ruin everything I'd worked for.

Once everyone had left class the week before, Isabelle handed me the seating chart and then exited the room too. I immediately looked to the spot where Tyler had been sitting and read his name, not realizing how satisfying it would be to put a name to his face.

Usually when I hooked up with someone, we shared our names at some point, but that night at Chrome, it had never come up between me and Tyler. And I had been okay with it until he walked into my classroom and changed everything.

When I pulled into the staff parking lot, Charlotte's car was already there. It was early in the morning with an hour before my class started and I needed some insight from my friend. She was the only one I could trust. And even though I

was worried about the dean or the school finding out, I had to pick her brain.

I knocked on her open door and she glanced up from her computer and smiled.

“Good morning, Char. How are you?” I walked inside.

“I need more caffeine. Planning a wedding is time consuming. I think I only get like five hours of sleep a night.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I teased. “But maybe you can mark a photographer off your to-do list.”

Her hazel eyes lit up. “No! I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You aren’t. I’d be more than happy to. All of your wedding needs. Engagement party, engagement photos, the wedding. Heck, I’ll document your bachelor and bachelorette parties if you want.”

“We might not want photographic evidence of those.” We both chuckled. “But if you’re sure—”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“I owe you then.”

“Well.” I shut the door behind me. “There is one thing.”

She lifted a brow. “What’s going on?”

I took a seat in a chair in front of her desk. “Just need to ask you something.”

“Okay,” she said skeptically. “What is it?”

I took a deep breath and looked around the tiny room as I tried to figure out how to pose my question. Charlotte was the only colleague I’d formed a friendship with while working at HU. We’d met up for drinks a few times a month if my busy schedule allowed, and talk about her relationship with Mitch or what had happened with Jonah, so I had to believe I could trust her.

“Have you ever been with someone who was off-limits?” I finally asked and met her stare.

She blinked. “No. Why?”

I took another deep breath. “Let’s just say—hypothetically—that I slept with a student before he was my student. Would that get me fired?”

Her hazel eyes widened, and she gasped. “Did you?”

“Maybe?” I grimaced.

“Oh, my god. Tell me. Who? When?”

I shook my head. “I can’t do that. It wouldn’t be fair to him. I know nothing about him except he’s in my class.”

“Oh. It was a one-night stand?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed. “Didn’t even catch his name that night and then, he walked into my class.”

“What are you going to do?”

I lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. That’s why I came to you.”

“Are you going to hook up with him again?”

“Of course not.” At least I didn’t plan on it despite my strong attraction to him.

“What did he say about you being his professor?”

I shrugged again. “Nothing. I haven’t spoken with him.”

Charlotte leaned back in her chair. “Okay. Well, you can do one of two things. First, talk to him and let him know you two need to pretend it never happened. Or second, not talk to him at all.”

“He’s in my class, Char. I can’t just ignore him.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do.” I sighed, but that didn’t mean I knew what to do, or that not speaking of that night was the best course of action.

We were silent for a few moments until she leaned forward again and said, “If anything, Hay, you need to get ahead of it. Pull him aside after class and let him know that whatever happened between the two of you was a one-time thing because if it continues, it could jeopardize your job.”

She was right, and when I walked into the classroom with Isabelle thirty minutes later, I knew what I had to do. Except when I saw Tyler stroll into the room, my heart felt as though it had stopped beating in my chest, and I was at a loss for words as I watched him shrug out of his coat. He was wearing a tight, long-sleeved, light blue Henley that showed off his broad chest and muscular arms. My mouth watered as I remembered what his skin tasted like, and I worried that I would be unable to form a sentence when I talked to him.

The night at Chrome, I'd had no problem approaching him because I had known what I wanted. Or rather who. It was easier to talk as strangers without any sort of connection hanging over my head. I wasn't a professor at the club—*his* professor. I was just another guy looking for a good time. So why was it so difficult for me to think about having a conversation about acting as though that night hadn't happened?

I cleared my throat. "All right, ladies and gentlemen. Who wants to be the first to share an image they found for their assignment?" As always, crickets. "Anyone?" My gaze moved to Tyler's, and I wasn't sure if I expected him to speak up or not, but a few seconds later, he did.

"I'll go."

"Perfect, Mr. ...?" I pretended as though I didn't know his name and looked over the seating chart. "Mr. Statler. What did you find?"

"First, Mr. Statler is my father." He smirked. "You can call me Tyler."

I tried to hide the grin on my face, but I couldn't. "All right, *Tyler*. What did you find?"

He dragged the image from his iPad to the shared drive that was connected to a screen in the front of the class. I clicked it and the photo opened. "I found a picture of the Eiffel Tower at night."

My breath hitched, and I tried everything in my power to not react and show how the image affected me. "Okay. And

why the Eiffel Tower at night?”

Tyler smiled slightly. “For a few reasons, actually.”

“Go on,” I urged, even though, if he mentioned in front of the entire class about the picture in my house, I was screwed.

“One reason is because I’ve always wanted to go to Paris. Have you ever been, Professor Foster?”

Of course, he already knew the answer. “I have,” I said with a nod. My heart pounded in my chest as I tried to show no facial expressions about him putting me on the spot, but I was curious where he was going with his questions and why the photo spoke to him. After all, the one in my house was not at night and the Eiffel Tower was in the distance.

“Then you know it’s illegal to take a picture of the Eiffel Tower at night.”

“I do.” I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned against the table behind me. “But only if you distribute the photograph for financial gain.”

“Right. It’s *forbidden* to sell the image unless you get approval from the Eiffel Tower society.”

I stared at him for a moment as I replayed the words he had spoken. My body temperature was starting to rise, and I began to sweat. He was fucking with me. He knew what we had done would be prohibited by the school. “And why does that speak to you?”

He leaned back in his chair and played with the pen on his desk as he spoke. “Besides always wanting to go to Paris and see such a beautiful landmark, the thought of doing something that could get me in trouble sparks a little something inside of me.”

I swallowed. “You like breaking the rules?”

“I’ve always been a rule follower, but if I get a chance to go to Paris and see the Eiffel Tower at night, I won’t hesitate to capture images of it. Maybe even videos.”

“Why is it illegal?” a female student asked, breaking my focus on Tyler.

I turned my attention to her. Didn't have a clue what her name was, so I just answered, "Because even though the landmark is in the public domain, the lights on the tower are not. After dark, at the top of the hour there's a five-minute light show and that show is copyrighted."

"So weird," another student muttered.

"All right. Who's next?" I asked, wanting to move on from Tyler and his innuendos, even though, if I was honest with myself, his confession to do something forbidden had sparked something in me too.

AFTER EVERYONE SHARED AT LEAST ONE PHOTO, I GAVE A fifteen-minute quiz about art photography versus photojournalism, a topic I had touched on the first day of class. I then lectured about understanding exposure (the amount of light that reaches the camera's sensors) and how to adjust the shutter speed based on lighting.

While the class read about depth of field, I went to my bag and pulled out Tyler's bracelet. The class was almost over and I wanted to give it back before he left again. It didn't feel right to throw it away, but I needed to get it out of my possession.

As I walked past his seat, I placed the bracelet onto the tablet he was reading from. He glanced up and met my eyes before I kept walking as though nothing had happened.

Once class was over, everyone picked up their belongings and headed out. I thought everyone was gone until I looked up from shoving my stuff into my briefcase and saw Tyler walking toward me. I was on edge again but somehow found my voice. "Is there something I can help you with, Tyler?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I just wanted to say thank you."

"For what?" I peeked toward the door to make sure we were alone.

"I'd thought I'd lost my bracelet. It means a lot to me."

“Not a problem.” I picked up my stuff and started to make my way to the exit.

“Can we talk?”

I stopped and turned to him and lowered my voice.

“I’m sure you know that if anyone were to find out about what happened, I could lose my job. It’s *forbidden*.” I used his word so he knew I understood why the photo of the Eiffel Tower spoke to him.

“I understand, but—”

“No buts, okay? Here, I’m just your professor. Do you understand?” My voice was still quiet as I pleaded with him to let whatever happened between us be nothing more than it was intended to be.

He nodded. “Yeah, I understand.”

“Great.” I walked out the door and it felt as though the invisible weight I’d been carrying around for a week had instantly dissipated.

TYLER

“YOU LIKE BREAKING THE RULES?”

When Professor Foster asked that question during the assignment discussion, I thought I'd heard a hint of challenge in his voice. Then after class when he said, *“Here, I'm just your professor,”* I decided his initial question was more of an accusation.

Regardless of the warning he issued before walking out, I could tell that the picture of the Eiffel Tower I had selected had affected him. It hadn't been my intention to fuck with his head. Initially, I planned to let the photo speak for itself as a little private connection between us. However, when the image popped up on the screen, I noticed he sucked in a small breath, and I couldn't stop myself from pushing the boundaries a bit.

Or maybe I read the entire situation wrong, and he didn't care about the photo at all. I'd spent the last week and a half remembering our night together, jerking off more times than I could count to mental images of him fucking me, and a part of me wanted him to feel as conflicted about our situation as I was.

I wasn't stupid. Even before he pleaded with me to understand, I knew the chance of anything happening again was slim because, like he'd said, he was my professor, and it was against the rules. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that

there could have been something more between us than a mind-blowing orgasm.

As I left his classroom, I decided to head over to The Daily Grind to get a cup of coffee and do some reading for my music class that I'd pushed off to the last minute. It took about twenty minutes to get across campus since I stopped to chat with some of my Sigma brothers along the way. Between the charity game coming up in a couple of months and being a part of the planning committee for our annual ski trip, the frat was taking up a lot of my time. Not that I minded much. I loved the camaraderie and friendship that came with being a part of a fraternity.

Besides, being busy gave me less time to obsess over my hot professor.

After walking into the coffee house, I placed my order at the counter, waited for my drink, and then found an open table in the corner. Grabbing my laptop from my bag, I pulled up the article I needed to read and set the alarm on my phone so I wouldn't lose track of time. It didn't take long for the noise and constant stream of people coming and going to fade into the background as I focused on the schoolwork in front of me.

Just as I finished reading a piece on digital music production, I heard the barista call out, "Americano for Hayden." My head snapped up, and it surprised me to see Professor Foster walk up to the counter and retrieve his drink.

I checked the time on my phone and realized his office hours had just ended, which meant I only had a few minutes before I needed to head over to the music building. I turned off my alarm and began to pack my stuff.

Glancing up, I tried to resist the temptation to look in his direction, but I couldn't stop myself. Our eyes locked and he stopped mid-stride. Unlike in class, there was no mistaking the heat in his gaze. His fingers tightened around his cup as I slowly perused his body. Knowing what he looked like under his navy overcoat and tan slacks sent a slight shiver down my spine. When my eyes returned to his face, I didn't miss the

clench of his jaw before he shook his head and proceeded to the door.

Picking up my bag, I studied the multi-colored threads on my wrist, which got me thinking. Why had Professor Foster kept my bracelet? If he'd had no intention of seeing me again, he would have thrown it away, right? And when he learned I was in his class, it would have made more sense to forget about it rather than return it and bring attention to the fact we'd hooked up.

Maybe Professor Foster wasn't as unaffected as I thought.

“YOU MISSED QUITE A SHOW LAST NIGHT WHILE YOU WERE AT your study group,” Fallon said as we walked into our photojournalism class the following Monday.

Since Professor Foster had been adamant about him only being my instructor, I decided on my way to campus the following week that the best thing to do would be to push the memory of our hook up out of my mind. However, when I saw him at the table in the front of class looking at his laptop while rubbing the back of his neck, I lost all my resolve. I would never be able to forget that night and how his hands felt. Still, I needed to respect his wishes since it was his job on the line.

So, instead of lusting after my teacher, I focused on the story Fallon was sharing. “What happened?”

“You know the girl Preston's been hooking up with?”

I nodded, remembering him introducing me to Marissa at our last party.

“Turns out she has a boyfriend.”

“Seriously?” We stood at our table, but neither one of us took a seat.

“Yep, and guess who showed up at her sorority house while Preston was balls deep in her?”

“You're shitting me.”

He snorted. “Oh, it gets better. Marissa’s friend ran to her room to let her know her boyfriend was there. Preston only had time to pull on his boxers before climbing out the window. Dumbass had to walk home practically naked in the freezing cold.”

I barked out a laugh. “Damn, I wish I’d been there to see that.”

“Mr. Statler and Mr. Donnelley, if you’re done chatting, can you take your seats so we can get started?”

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

Fallon and I sat down, and I pulled out my laptop, ready to take notes as Professor Foster spoke.

“Today, we’re taking class outside. I want you to find something to photograph that depicts the rich history of Hawkins University and work on aesthetic effects of manipulating the elements of exposure. Take the exact same picture at least five times with the same overall exposure but use different combinations of the settings on your camera. Keep the ISO the same each time. You’ll want to start with the lowest aperture. For each image, write down the exposure settings; F-stop, shutter speed and ISO. Pay attention to motion blur and depth of field. If the images vary in brightness, you’re doing something wrong. I’ll be walking around to review your pictures and offer suggestions. Any questions?”

When no one said anything, we grabbed our cameras and headed outside. As the class dispersed, I knew exactly where I wanted to go. An old stone pavilion stood not far from Miller Hall. It was surrounded by sugar maple trees and had been one of the first structures built on campus in the early 1700s.

Since it was off the beaten path, no one was there when I arrived. I walked around and noticed a red-winged blackbird perched on a bare tree branch. I set the ISO settings on my camera and began snapping several photos, changing the aperture speed each time.

While reviewing the pictures on the tiny screen, I heard footsteps approaching from behind me.

“This is one of my favorite spots on campus.” Professor Foster’s deep voice washed over me.

“Mine too. We don’t have many buildings this old in California.”

“Is that where you’re from?”

I turned to face him. “Yeah. I was born and raised in San Diego. How about you?” I wasn’t sure if he would answer me because it felt as though we were entering dangerous territory by sharing personal information with one another.

“I’m from here. Grew up just outside of Boston.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds. It seemed neither of us knew what else to say, and I could feel the tension growing between us.

Finally, he broke the silence. “Mind if I take a look?” He gestured at my camera.

I nodded and handed it over. Our fingers brushed against each other, and it felt as though he maintained the touch for longer than necessary, which made my skin tingle. I looked up at my professor to see if he’d felt it too, but his face gave nothing away.

“These are really good. See how the trees in the background blur depending on the aperture setting?” He took a step to stand next to me and angled the camera around so he could show me what he was talking about. We were so close; I could feel his body heat through the layers of our clothing.

“I do.”

“Widening the aperture reduces the depth of field. Less of the image is in focus and the bird stands out from the background and foreground.”

“Yeah.”

“You definitely have an eye for photography.” His warm breath floated across my cheek.

“Thank you,” I rasped.

We turned toward each other, only a couple of inches between us, and I couldn't help but think about us standing on the street outside of Chrome when he wrapped his arms around me. It made me long for that connection again.

“Tyler,” he breathed, but the moment was broken by the sound of voices nearby.

We quickly moved away from each other just as two guys from class came into view. Professor Foster walked over to them without another word, and I heard him ask to look at the images they'd shot.

Since I was done, I made my way back to our building and found Fallon just outside the entrance.

“Find anything good?” he asked as I approached.

“I think so.”

As we walked into the classroom, Fallon said, “Before I forget, my father gave me his tickets to the Bruins game on Friday. You wanna go with me?”

“Sure,” I replied.

Sports weren't really my thing. Still, it beat sitting in my room, pining for someone I couldn't have.

HAYDEN

MY EYES FLUTTERED OPEN, AND I GROANED. MY DICK WAS hard as a rock and I hadn't even woken from a sexy dream.

Pushing the sheet down my naked body, I lay on my back, my cock aching for attention. As soon as I skimmed a finger down my length, my eyes closed again and my thoughts immediately went to Tyler. Memories of the V cut rising from the waist of his pants came to mind as I ran several fingers slowly from the head of my cock, down and across my balls before going back up. I ached more and knew teasing myself wasn't going to be enough.

The air in the room was cool because the heater hadn't kicked on yet. When I wrapped my hand around my warm shaft, the temperature contrast added to the pleasure, and I was so into it, there was no need for lotion or lube as I stroked myself faster.

My mouth watered and my tempo increased as I remembered what I'd found beneath Tyler's pants that night. Varying my rhythm and adding a slight twist of the wrist, I wanted to come so badly, but I also craved to prolong the forbidden pleasure racing through me because I knew the privacy of my bedroom was the only place I could indulge in the lust I had for my student.

In my mind's eye, Tyler's erection bobbed free as I dragged his jeans down his legs, and that was all I could take. My body convulsed, a moan escaped my throat, and I shot my hot load all over my chiseled abs.

Lying back for a moment, I waited for my breathing and heart rate to return to normal before I cleaned myself up and got dressed in a long-sleeved green T-shirt and gray sweatpants.

After I made a cup of coffee, I went into my home office and fired up my computer. When I wasn't racing off to teach on Mondays, I worked from home unless I was out in the field photographing an event. I oversaw the sports department at *The Hub* and mainly covered sporting events unless I was put on assignment to do something else, like shot a breaking news story when other photographers weren't available. I was the head of my department, so it was rare I had to do something other than what game was on my calendar.

I had told my parents that I was in a relationship with a Bruins' player, but since Jonah was in the closet, I hadn't mentioned his name. I was sure they connected the dots when he died and I immediately stopped shooting the sport I had loved for years. Of course, they couldn't have known that Jonah and I had gotten into an argument the day he was killed or that the fight was because I was tired of hiding. I knew there was a stigma about gay athletes, and maybe it was greedy of me to ask him to be out, but I hated not being able to be in public with him. It hurt me every day that I couldn't introduce him to my family, and that was why I had selfishly pushed so hard.

Yet here I was, lusting after my student and in a similar situation.

But Tyler and I could never let the world know we had hooked up, which was why nothing could happen with him, no matter how many stolen glances we shared, or how many little innuendos he let slip, or how often I indulged in fantasies about him.

Once my computer booted, I went to check my school email to see what had come through while I was sleeping.

I'd been up late after the Celtics game, editing images and writing captions for each photo, so the sportswriters had something to work with for their article about the team's win against the Toronto Raptors. Baseball season was worse because of the number of home games the Red Sox played. And then of course, my calendar got especially hectic when the seasons overlapped and I had to cover multiple games on the same day. Lucky for me, I had two people in my department to help.

As I took a sip of coffee, my cell rang before I could see if anyone had emailed.

"Hey, Jack. What's up?" I asked the caller. Jack was one of the sports photojournalists in my department.

"Hayden, thank God."

I arched a brow. "This doesn't sound good."

"I ... ah ... need a favor."

"Okay." I leaned back in my chair, concerned about what he was going to ask, given that he seemed nervous, and I was his boss.

"I know you shot the Celtics game last night, but I was hoping there might be a chance you could do the Bruins game tonight."

My breathing hitched. Jack had no idea why I didn't cover hockey anymore.

"I know it's last minute," he continued. "But I have food poisoning and since you used to shoot their games, I figured you were the best person to ask, or at the very least, you could find someone to cover for me."

Fuck. How could I say no when he was sick? Food poisoning was awful and there was nothing to do but wait it out. Plus, we only had three sports photographers in my department, and Chelsea was on vacation because she had just shot the Super Bowl and wanted time with her family.

“Yeah, man, of course.”

“Oh, thank you so much. I’ll return the favor anytime.”

“Just take it easy and drink lots of fluids.”

“Been doing that all morning trying to shake this, but nothing is staying down and I feel like crap.”

“Go rest. I’ve got you covered.”

“Thanks again.”

After we hung up, I didn’t know how long I stared at the wall, trying to tell myself that attending a hockey game wasn’t going to affect me once I stepped foot into the arena.

But I knew better than that.

THE LAST TIME I SAW A HOCKEY GAME, EITHER IN PERSON OR on television, it was to watch my boyfriend play.

Jonah and I had met at a gay club and I had been starstruck when I saw him walk in through the door. Since I had been the one to photograph all the games at the time, I recognized him immediately. I’d had no idea he was gay, though, and as I watched him make his way toward the bar, I could tell he was nervous. Once I bought him a drink, he loosened up. After a few cocktails, we went back to my place, and even though it had almost been a mood killer, he made me sign a non-disclosure agreement before we hooked up.

After our first night together, whenever the Bruins had played at home, I shot the games and then went to my place and waited for Jonah to come over. We would stay at my house, never going out to do anything as a couple except occasionally hanging out with the one teammate he confided in, and I had been okay with our arrangement until I wasn’t.

It had been hard living a secret, and when I had begged him to come out because I couldn’t stand hiding our relationship any longer, we’d gotten into a fight. He left, only to lose control of his car on an icy road.

I still beat myself up over it because if I hadn't been self-centered, we would have never gotten into the spat that had made him walk out my door. He'd only had a few more years of playing left, and I should have stuck it out. Plenty of men and women hid for one reason or another, and having known Jonah did so because of the sports world, it should have been okay with me.

Snatching my press badge from my center console, I slipped it around my head and opened the door to my SUV. I took a deep breath and grabbed my camera bag. Unfortunately, no matter how much I wanted to get the night over with, I knew I had to stay for the entire game.

With each step I took toward the door, my palms seemed to sweat more. I had just been at the arena the night before for the basketball game, but if someone were to see me now, they'd probably assume it was my first day on the job because I looked so nervous, so unsure. I kept looking around as though I would see Jonah—that he would be wearing his pre-game suit and enter the locker room as he had so many times in the four years we dated.

I adjusted the bag strap on my shoulder, held up my badge to the door attendant, and then made my way to the dedicated area for the press. There was a little cut out in the plexiglass for my EF 70-200mm telephoto lens, and I took my camera out and got ready for the players to skate onto the ice.

Within minutes, both teams came out for warm-ups and I snapped picture after picture. The shots I would use for *The Hub* would be of the game, but I needed to make sure my settings were correct given a hockey rink was much different from a basketball court. For one, I had to set my white balance correctly given all the white: the ice, the running boards, and even the away team's jersey. It was standard in the NHL for the home team to wear their colors and the away team to be in white.

Even though I knew hockey, I was going to be at a disadvantage for the game because I had no clue who to focus on in the fast-paced game. I wasn't familiar with the players anymore because I hadn't followed the game in three years.

Well, except one, and he was skating my way. I pulled my lens from the opening so we could speak to each other.

“I thought that was you,” Emmett Cooper said as he skidded to a stop. He had been Jonah’s best friend on the team and the only one who had known Jonah’s sexuality.

I noticed the yellow C on his jersey. The same one Jonah had worn when he had been the captain. “What’s up, Coop? Haven’t seen you—” *Since Jonah’s funeral.*

He smiled warmly. “Yeah. It’s been a long time. Glad to see you back behind the glass.”

“It feels good,” I lied. My nerves were still racing, and I hoped that once the game started and I was doing my thing, I wouldn’t think about the past.

“We should catch up sometime.” A puck slid around the baseboard and he hit it away.

“Yeah, I’d love that.” I wasn’t sure if I was lying or not, but it seemed like the proper response.

“Cool. Hit me up sometime soon.”

“Will do.” I smiled, and it was a genuine one because I liked Coop, especially since I knew Jonah had trusted him and valued their friendship.

Coop skated off, and I put my lens back into the opening and continued to capture some shots. Once the players were done warming up, the teams went to their respective locker rooms, and I sat back in my chair.

Even though I frequented the arena for basketball games and knew the surroundings, I found myself scanning the crowd, only to lock eyes with the person I had thought about first thing that morning.

TYLER

WHEN THE FINAL BUZZER SOUNDED, MY GAZE FLICKED TO where Professor Foster stood on the other side of the arena. I'd paid more attention to him than I had to most of the action on the ice. He'd looked in my direction a few times in between periods and during timeouts, but would turn away whenever he realized I'd caught him staring. To my surprise, Fallon hadn't noticed our teacher the entire time.

With the game over, we stood to leave and I watched as my teacher packed up his equipment and rushed out of the press area. The first day of class, he mentioned he worked as a sports photographer for a local news outlet, but I had no idea he covered hockey. I was disappointed when he didn't offer me another glance before he bailed because with every stolen look we had shared, there had been a split second when he appeared as tortured about our situation as I felt.

"So, what did you think? Have I turned you into a hockey fan yet?" Fallon clapped me on the shoulder as we waited for the others to exit our row.

"It was pretty cool, I guess." From what I'd seen of the game when I wasn't focused on my professor, I could understand why Fallon liked hockey so much. Even though the Bruins lost, the constant action on the ice kept it entertaining. Plus, the players throwing punches added a bit of excitement

that took my attention away from the man I had no business staring at.

“You guess? C’mon, it’s at least better than baseball.”

I shook my head and laughed. “Don’t let my dads or brothers ever hear you say that.” Not only was my stepfather a former MLB player, but my father had played in college and both of my brothers were on the UCLA baseball team.

When we finally got to Fallon’s car, he turned to me and asked, “Do you still want to head to Chrome?”

We had talked about grabbing a drink after the game, and I’d suggested going to Chrome since Fallon hadn’t been there before and we’d be in the city.

“Of course,” I replied, grabbing my button-up shirt from the backseat. We couldn’t roll up to the club wearing a hoodie or, in Fallon’s case, his Bruins jersey. Since we knew we were going out afterward, we’d brought a change of clothes.

Once we changed, Fallon entered the address into his GPS and we joined the rest of the cars trying to leave the parking lot.

When we arrived at Chrome, the line wound around the building. “Looks like it’s packed,” Fallon said, as he pulled into a parking garage.

“It’ll be worth it.” While I’d been wanting to bring Fallon to the club since my first visit a few weeks ago, after seeing Hayden earlier I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d show up.

After we managed to find a parking spot, we joined the others waiting to get inside. Thirty minutes later, we showed the bouncers our IDs, and they waved us into the club. “Hot In It” by Charli XCX pumped through the speakers, and we skirted the packed dance floor to get to the bar.

“What do you want to drink?” I asked Fallon, as we waited for one of the busy bartenders.

“I’ll just have a beer since I have to drive later.” It was something we were all careful about since driving under the influence was stupid as fuck.

Once a bartender came over, I asked for two bottles of Sam Adams and then paid before we found a high-top table to sit at.

“This place is awesome,” Fallon said, as he looked around. “Why haven’t we been coming here instead of Ernie’s?”

I chuckled. “I’m not sure this is really any of the other guys’ scene.”

“True.”

Scanning the room, I searched for a familiar pair of light green eyes. Deep down, I knew I needed to let go of my obsession with my professor. It was a waste of time longing for someone when we couldn’t be together. Yet, I felt drawn to him whenever we were near each other, like during our last class.

I was about to give up my search when I saw the man I couldn’t stop thinking about sitting alone at a table in the corner. I could tell the moment he noticed me because his drink paused halfway to his lips, and he closed his eyes and shook his head.

We stared at each other until Fallon’s words distracted me. “That guy is hot.”

At first, I thought he was talking about our teacher, but just as quickly, I realized that wouldn’t have been what he would say if he’d seen him.

“Which guy?” I asked.

He pointed his bottle toward the bar. “The one in blue.”

I looked to where he indicated and saw a tall blond smiling in our direction. “You should go talk to him.”

Fallon took a sip of his beer. “I think I will.”

I had no doubt it would be a while before I saw him again. With his neatly styled chestnut hair and vibrant greenish-blue eyes, it wasn’t often a guy could ignore my best friend’s advances.

While he headed toward the bar, my attention turned to where Professor Foster sat. I watched as he finished his drink,

placed it back on the table, then got up and walked down the hallway where the bathrooms were located. Without another thought, I swallowed the last of my beer and walked in the same direction.

The man I wanted to see was nowhere to be found, so I leaned against the wall across from the bathroom and waited for him to come out. A couple of minutes later, he opened the door, but stopped when he saw me standing there.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before looking at me again. “What are you doing, Tyler?”

“I was waiting for you.”

“Shouldn’t you be out there with Fallon?”

Was that a hint of jealousy I heard in his voice?

“Fallon and I came here together but aren’t *together*, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He shook his head. “It’s not my business.”

I took a step closer to him. “It kinda sounds like you want it to be your business.”

He grabbed my arm and directed me to the far end of the hallway. It was dark and unlikely that anyone would notice us even if they went to the bathroom. “We’ve talked about this. I’m your professor. Nothing more can happen between us.”

I took a step forward and whispered into his ear. “You’re not my professor here, *Hayden*.”

Pulling back, we stared at each other for a beat before he grumbled, “Fuck it,” and crashed his mouth to mine while pushing me against the wall.

I’d waited weeks to feel his lips again, and this kiss felt even more electric than the ones we’d shared the night we met. When he slid his tongue into my mouth, I couldn’t hold back the moan that escaped. I moved my hand down his body and cupped his very noticeable bulge and his dick hardened even more under my touch.

“God, I want you so much,” I growled as his lips trailed down my neck.

Abruptly, he broke our kiss and said, “I gotta go.”

He rushed out of the hallway, and it took a second for me to process what had happened. Following his path, I stepped into the open space and looked at the table he had been sitting at, but another group was there. When I didn’t see him at the bar, I peered through the sea of people near the door just in time to see him walk outside.

I ordered a shot of tequila and another beer before returning to the table where I’d been sitting, which—lucky for me—was still free. Downing the shot, I tried to numb the empty feeling that had settled over me. Fallon was on the dance floor with the blond, which gave me a chance to collect my thoughts. I’d give myself the night to have a pity party, and then I would finally put what had happened with Hayden behind me and move on.

GLANCING AT THE CLOCK, I SAW IT WAS NEARLY TEN. I’D spent most of my Saturday working on assignments. In a few short months I’d be graduating, and I was determined to not fall behind on classwork. As I shut off my laptop, my cell chimed with a text.

Dylan: Hey. Has Lisa messaged you?

Usually, I was happy to get a message from my brother, but him mentioning our biological mother concerned me.

Me: No. I still have her number blocked. Why?

The dots that indicated he was typing kept flashing, but it took a bit for another text to come through.

Dylan: I must have forgotten to block her when I got my new number. Somehow she found it and texted me

My brother and I had cut off all contact with Lisa years ago. After she and our dad divorced when Dylan and I were toddlers, she only parented when she felt like it or when it served her to pretend to be a mom. Our dad was the one who loved us unconditionally, and who made sure we were taken care of.

When I was fourteen, she had gotten engaged to a guy named Miguel. During a trip to Texas to visit her, she and her fiancé found out my dad was dating Chase, and they decided they weren't going to send my brother and me back home since they didn't approve of my father's relationship with another man. It was a total clusterfuck that ended with my dad getting full custody of me and Dylan. Lisa was granted supervised visitation once a month, and Miguel had to stay a hundred yards away from us. After our first visit with her where she continued to spout homophobic shit, we both told our dad we didn't want to see her anymore, and since Lisa didn't like it when being a parent took effort, she didn't fight it.

Me: What did she want?

Dylan: She said she divorced Miguel and moved back to San Diego. I guess she wants to see us

Me: Too bad for her, we don't live there anymore

Not that my location mattered. Even if I did live in San Diego, I wouldn't want to see her. Maybe some people could change, but I highly doubted she had. She never once made an attempt to apologize for what happened between us, or acknowledge how hurtful her behavior had been over the years.

When Dylan didn't reply to my last text, I sent another:

What are you going to do?

Dylan: Idk. I don't really want to see her

Me: Then don't. You don't owe her anything

Dylan: You're right. Are you still coming home for spring break?

Me: Yeah. J Mom would kill me if I wasn't there for Cammie's birthday. It sounds like she and our dads are going a little crazy with the party planning

The last I heard, our parents had hired a well-known DJ and a world-class caterer for the one hundred friends and family members who had been invited. Thank goodness, my dads had a huge house with plenty of outdoor space to accommodate everyone.

Dylan: I think Cam's their favorite 😊

Me: Probably. LOL I'll talk to you soon

Dylan: Later

Between having a hard time forgetting what happened with Hayden and learning my mother wanted to see me, I was a bit on edge. Maybe a workout would help me get my mind right again. Sports weren't my thing, but when all the shit went down with Lisa years ago, my dads thought hitting up the gym would help me deal with the anger I felt at times. They taught me how to do it in a safe and healthy manner, and it became a part of my regular routine.

I changed into a gray ribbed tank top and black sweats and walked down to the basement filled with state-of-the-art gym equipment. I'd just started running on the treadmill when Ford walked in. I gave him a nod when he looked in my direction, but didn't try to talk to him as he climbed onto the bike a few feet away. Our paths had only crossed a few times since the party Sigma had hosted a couple of weeks ago, and each time there had been other people around, so we hadn't talked to each other.

We both continued our workouts, but every so often, I noticed him looking at me in the mirror's reflection. At one point he opened his mouth as if to say something, but then he closed it again and looked back at the screen on the exercise bike. I wasn't going to ask him if he wanted to talk since I'd

moved on from our breakup, and it was up to him whether he wanted us to try to be friends or not.

After running a few miles, I climbed off the treadmill and grabbed my water bottle.

“Hey, do you think we could—” Ford’s words were cut off by Preston and Derek walking into the room.

“What’s up?” Derek greeted.

“Nothing much, man. Just finished up.” I snagged my towel, wrapped it around my neck, and walked up the stairs. If Ford wanted to chat, he knew where to find me.

When I reached the kitchen, my text notification went off again. I expected to see my brother’s name on the screen, but the message was from an unknown number.

HAYDEN

THE ITALIAN-INSPIRED WINERY SMELLED OF OAK AND fermented alcohol as I entered the brick-walled building where Charlotte was having her engagement party. I gave the coat-check my winter jacket and then made my way into the main room. String lights draped above the large open space filled with circular high-top tables covered with white linens. Vases of pink camellias sat in the middle of each table surrounded by LED votive candles.

I'd purposefully arrived thirty minutes early so I could snap photos before anyone arrived, and I was almost certain I had beaten Charlotte until she and Mitch walked out of a room in the back. My friend's eyes lit up, and she opened her arms asking for a hug.

"Oh, you're here already." We embraced.

"Just doing my job," I teased as I held up my camera bag and then shook Mitch's hand.

"Thank you again. We appreciate it so, so much," Charlotte gushed.

"Not a problem." I set my bag on a table and unzipped it. "You two just do your thing and I'll be in the background snapping away." I wore a black button-up with a black silk tie and black pants so I wouldn't appear in anything that had a reflection while I took the photos.

“I want a picture with you too.” Charlotte frowned. “Even if it’s with my phone.”

“Of course. Just let me know when.”

“How about now?” Mitch suggested.

“Sure.” I set my camera down and stood next to Charlotte, who wore a silver cocktail dress that came to just above her knees. We smiled as her fiancé took a few photos with her cell, and then I went back to putting my lens on my camera.

“Even though you call this your job, you know you’re still a guest, right?” Charlotte inquired.

“I do.”

“Great. Please take time to get dinner and drink as much wine as you’d like. Have a good time, okay?”

“Don’t worry. I took a rideshare so I can drink.” I winked.

Charlotte and Mitch let me be and I went around the room, taking pictures of some oak barrels that stuck out of the wall for décor, and the food the staff was setting out. I even snapped a few candid shots of the couple and their guests who started to arrive. I wanted to document everything for my friend because the moment couldn’t be replicated.

My phone vibrated in my slacks pocket, and I let the camera hang around my neck as I quickly pulled out my cell to see who had texted.

Coop: It was good seeing you at the game. Are you busy tonight?

I replied:

Hey there. I’m at a friend’s engagement party. What’s up?

I took a few more pictures while I waited for him to text back.

Coop: Guys and I are going out for drinks tonight since we don’t have a game. You should come. I’d love to catch up like we talked about

It sucked that over the three years since Jonah had passed, Coop and I had grown apart. And if I were being honest with myself, I missed hockey. It had felt good to be in the arena and watch the action again.

When the ice first came into view, my thoughts had gone to my late boyfriend, but as soon as my gaze had collided with Tyler's, everything changed. I had gone from being sad and trying not to think about the past to feeling as though the universe was fucking with me. In a sea of twenty thousand people, the one man who consumed most of my thoughts recently had been looking back at me.

When I'd first told Coop that I would love to get together, I had thought I was lying, but now I felt it would be good to catch up with him because I did miss his friendship.

Me: Yeah, I'd like that too. Let me know where and I'll meet you after I'm done with this party

I put my phone back in my pocket and returned to capturing Charlotte's party. As I did, I enjoyed a few glasses of the winery's sauvignon blanc, and another glass with the baked haddock. Needless to say, when the engagement party was over, I was feeling pretty good.

After ordering a rideshare, I said goodbye to the happy couple and then grabbed my coat and waited outside for the driver. Once he arrived, he took me to my house so I could drop off my camera, discard my tie, and then drove me to the bar in the city where Coop and his teammates were hanging out.

My slight buzz was already fading as I walked into the speakeasy-inspired eatery and made my way through the restaurant and into the hidden bar in the back. Coop spotted me immediately and flagged me over to a table he and four other guys were sitting at. I had to admit that hanging out with a group of men I assumed were all straight wasn't something I did often. Getting chummy with pro athletes wasn't the norm for me either. If I were still up to date on all their stats, I would certainly be in awe of these guys. Hell, I was in awe, given what I remembered from the game I just shot.

Coop stood and shook my hand. “Glad you could make it.”

“Me too.”

He turned and said, “Guys, this is my good friend, Hayden.” I shook each man’s hand as Coop continued. “I’m sure you know Butcher, Sexton, Orlov, and Nyström.”

“Of course,” I lied. Coop had no idea I no longer followed the game, but I was familiar with the names from watching them play the night before. “Got some good shots of your fight, Butcher.”

He balked. “Shots?”

“Hayden works for *The Hub*,” Coop explained.

“You invited the press?” Orlov questioned in his Russian accent. There was a slight smile on his face, and I had to hope he was teasing.

“Not here for work, but I was promised there would be drinking,” I replied.

“Hell yeah,” Coop bellowed. “Let’s go to the bar.”

I followed him and immediately the bartender came over despite the number of people bellied up to the bartop. “What can I get you, Coop?” he asked.

“Another negroni and ...” He looked at me.

“I’ll have the same. Thanks.” Even though I had consumed four glasses of wine over the course of a couple hours, I felt it was okay to have something stronger. I wasn’t driving after all.

“So, how have you been?” Coop squeezed my shoulder.

“Good, man. Working and teaching.”

His brow furrowed. “Teaching?”

I realized then he didn’t know because I had become a professor after Jonah passed away. “I teach photojournalism at Hawkins University.”

“Oh wow, that’s cool.”

The bartender placed our drinks in front of us, and I reached for my wallet.

“I got it,” Coop stated. “Add them to my tab.”

The bartender nodded, and I said, “Thanks. You didn’t need to do that.”

“Not a problem.”

I took a sip of the herby cocktail. “What about you? I have to admit I haven’t been keeping up with hockey as much since —” I took a breath and continued. “I’ve been covering basketball and baseball instead.”

He gave a tight smile as though he understood. “Things are good. Made captain this season when Umstatt was traded to the Stars.”

“I saw you sporting that C on your jersey last night. Congrats.”

“Thanks. So”—he rubbed the back of his neck nervously—“there’s something I need to pick your brain about.”

I cocked my head slightly. “Okay?”

He looked around and said, “Not here.”

I was taken aback more. “All right ...?”

“You still don’t smoke?”

“What?” I blinked.

“Just go with it and follow me outside, okay?”

“All right.” I wasn’t sure what was going on, but I trusted Coop, so we downed our drinks in a hurry and then walked back to the table where his friends were.

“Hayden needs a smoke. We’ll be back.”

I what?

Continuing to follow Coop, we made our way through the restaurant and into the chilly outdoors. Snow had started to fall in the short time I’d been catching up with my friend.

“I’ll make this quick since it’s freezing out here.” He motioned for me to move down the sidewalk a little and away from the door. “I didn’t think I’d do this tonight, but it’s been eating at me for a long time and I just ...”

I waited a few moments for him to keep going but he didn’t. “Everything okay?”

He looked up at the inky sky. “I’ve never told anyone this.”

“Whatever it is, I’m here for you, man.”

Coop took a deep breath and then met my stare. “I’m gay.”

“Oh.” My eyes widened in surprise, not having any clue he was going to drop a bomb like that. For as long as I’d known Emmett Cooper, I never suspected he was anything except straight. I wasn’t exactly sure why, other than my own assumptions and the fact he never mentioned it to Jonah and me when we were together. Thinking back on all the times I’d hung out with him, he had never once indicated any sort of attachment to anyone. He was always by himself and I thought it was because he was focused on his career.

“I’m sorry to just blurt it out like—”

Without another word, I engulfed him in a powerful hug. “It’s okay.

We pulled apart, and he blew out a breath, as though some sort of weight had been lifted. “I think I just needed to tell someone.”

“I’m here for you anytime you need to talk or if there’s anything you need from me.”

“Thank you,” he said again. “As I get closer to the end of my career, I’ve been thinking a lot about my future and how I’d like to settle down some day. It’s been consuming my thoughts and affecting my game. I figured you were a good person to come to since you witnessed how Jonah struggled with everything.”

As far as I knew, Coop hadn’t been aware of the fight I’d had with Jonah before he died. However, he did know our

entire relationship had been a secret, and Coop and I both understood how much it took a toll on Jonah every day to be in the closet. I wouldn't make the same mistake with Coop as I had with Jonah by pushing him. If he wanted to come out, I would support him in any way I could. If he wanted to just tell me to get it off his chest, then that was okay too.

"I understand, and you call me anytime you need to talk."

"I will."

"Let's get out of the freezing cold." He started for the door.

Once inside, we walked straight back to the bar and got another round of negronis before going back to his friends. Coop cracked jokes with the guys and I couldn't help but notice he was smiling bigger and brighter than he had been when I'd first arrived.

While the group talked about how the Bruins were probably not going to make the playoffs, I thought about my own secret—the one I had kissed in a dim hallway. The mere thought of Tyler's tongue in my mouth and how his body had pressed against mine was enough to stir my dick. With the gin flowing in my veins, I took out my phone, logged into the cloud where I stored my files, and got his number from the info Isabelle had collected on the first day of class and sent Tyler a text.

Come over

I saved his number under a nickname and took a sip of my drink as I waited to see if he would reply. Finally, he did.

Who is this?

Me: Who do you want it to be?

Another swallow.

Bracelet Guy: I don't know who you are but you can stop fucking with me

Me: I'm not fucking with you. Well I did fuck you once

And another gulp of my drink.

Bracelet Guy: Oh yeah? When??

Me: Do you have that many guys fucking you?

I finished my cocktail as I waited for his reply.

Bracelet Guy: That's none of your business and if we did fuck then tell me when

Me: You left your bracelet at my place

There were no dancing bubbles on the screen for what seemed like forever until finally he responded:

Yeah I'll come over

Me: I'll be home in an hour

TYLER

FOR A SPLIT SECOND, I HESITATED TO ACCEPT HAYDEN'S invitation, but I quickly caved and told him I would come over. He'd been quick to run off after our encounter at Chrome the night before, and while I was excited about seeing him away from campus, I was also curious what had happened in the last twenty-four hours that made him go from freaked out about kissing me to sending me what could only be described as a late-night booty call text.

I raced upstairs to the second floor and hopped in the shower. No way was I going to show up at his house sweaty from my workout. After quickly drying off and getting dressed, I took a step toward my bedroom door to leave, but then turned and went to my bedside table. Despite Hayden having condoms the last time I ended up at his house, one could never be too prepared. I rummaged around in the drawer before grabbing the foil packet I sought. I tucked it into my pocket before deciding to snag a few more just in case the night went in the direction I wanted it to.

I checked my phone to make sure Hayden hadn't texted again, and while staring at the screen, I almost collided with Fallon at the base of the stairs. "Where are you off to in such a rush?" he asked.

"Uh ... I'm meeting a friend from my music class for drinks."

“Cool. Don’t forget about our chapter meeting tomorrow.”

“I won’t,” I called out as I left.

Between the time it took for me to get ready and the drive over, it had been over an hour since Hayden had texted. My heart raced as I walked up to his front door. I’d been wanting a repeat with him since I’d left his house after our first night together, and I hoped the second one would live up to the memory I couldn’t get out of my mind.

I rang the doorbell and waited, but he didn’t answer. Pressing the button again, I looked through the large window next to the door and didn’t see any lights on inside. My brow furrowed. *Where the hell was he?*

I snatched my phone from my jeans pocket and typed a message:

I’m at your front door. Where are you?

As soon as I sent the text, a car pulled up in front of the house, and I watched as Hayden stumbled out of the backseat. Was my professor intoxicated? My heart sank as I realized that was probably the only reason he had texted me, because he’d made it pretty damn clear we couldn’t hook up again. Yet, I believed he’d changed his mind.

I jogged down his steps and rushed to help him so he wouldn’t fall, and a smile spread across his face as I approached.

“Hey,” he slurred. “You showed up.”

He tripped on the step leading to his door and I grabbed his arm to steady him. “I said I would.”

“I’m glad.” He swayed slightly as we stood at his front door, and I could smell the alcohol on his breath.

“You’re drunk.”

“No, I’m not,” he argued while trying to enter his passcode on the keypad on his door. When it didn’t unlock, he cursed under his breath and tried again. Finally, after the third attempt, he was able to get it open. He stumbled over the

threshold, but I continued to stand on the porch. He turned and asked, “Aren’t you going to come in?”

“That’s probably not a great idea.” I bit my bottom lip nervously.

“Why not? You’re already here.”

Leaving would have been the smart thing to do, but I couldn’t seem to force myself to do it. Instead, I silently followed him inside.

Hayden shook off his coat and hung it on the coat rack before bracing himself against the wall to kick off his shoes. Since I’d decided to stay, I took off my jacket and hung it next to his. He smiled as he grabbed my hand and led me to the living room.

When we reached the couch, he motioned for me to sit, and we both plopped down on the leather side by side.

“Tyler ...” he whispered.

“Yes, Hay—Professor Foster?”

He rested the side of his head on the back of the couch as he turned slightly to face me. “I’m not your professor here.”

I swallowed. “Okay?”

He moved his hand onto my thigh. “I can’t stop thinking about you. It’s becoming a problem.”

His fingers inched closer to my denim covered bulge and even though I’d come over intending to get some action, I placed my hand over his and stopped his movement. “We shouldn’t—”

“Why not?” He leaned closer and pressed his lips against my neck.

I closed my eyes, relishing the way his hot mouth made my skin tingle, but somehow managed to reply, “Because you’re drunk, and you’ve told me multiple times that us having sex again would get you fired.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t want you.”

I turned toward him. “I want you too, but—”

He silenced me with his mouth, and a moan escaped my throat as I melted into his kiss. When his tongue slipped past my lips, I could taste the booze and it reminded me he was drunk.

I pulled away, holding him back with my hands against his shoulders. It didn’t matter how much I wanted another night with him; I didn’t want to mess around when he wasn’t thinking clearly and would likely regret it the next day. “We can’t do this, remember?”

He leaned back and sighed. “You told me you were a rule follower, but the thought of doing something that could get you in trouble sparked a little something inside of you. It does me too.”

The last four words were a whisper and I looked over at him. His eyes closed, and after a few moments, his breathing evened out. It appeared as though he had fallen asleep. Figuring our night was truly over, I stood and helped him lay down fully on the couch. A blanket lay folded over the back of the recliner next to us, so I grabbed it to cover him.

As I turned to leave, I heard him whisper, “Don’t go.”

My steps faltered, and I looked down at his sleeping form. My rational side told me I should walk out and go home, but the rest of me wanted to stay with him. So, against my better judgment, I sat down in the recliner and made myself comfortable.

Before I realized it, I fell asleep too.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I WOKE WITH A JOLT, MOMENTARILY forgetting where I was. I looked around and saw Hayden still sleeping on the couch beside me. Knowing he’d likely have a hangover and would need to eat, I decided to make him breakfast after a quick trip to the bathroom to freshen up.

Once I started a pot of coffee, I began searching for ingredients in his state-of-the-art kitchen. His fridge was well-stocked, and I opted to make some eggs, bacon, and toast.

From the corner of my eye, I watched Hayden enter the kitchen. His slightly messy honey brown hair and wrinkled clothes didn't detract from how hot he was. If anything, it made him sexier.

"Good morning," I greeted.

His eyes widened. "You're making breakfast?"

"Uh, yeah. It'll be ready soon, and I made some coffee." I pointed to the coffeemaker on the counter.

"Thanks," he grumbled before pouring himself a cup and taking a sip. "I ... I think I owe you an apology for my behavior last night."

I waved him off. Despite knowing we probably needed to have a conversation about what happened, I didn't want him to feel bad. "Don't worry about it. I live in a frat house. Dealing with drunk guys comes with the territory."

"But I'm not one of your frat brothers. I'm your professor."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm well aware of who you are. You've reminded me of that fact several times, yet you're the one who invited me over."

"I shouldn't have—"

"Why don't we eat first and then we can talk?"

He stared at me for a second before nodding. "Okay."

While frying a couple of eggs for both of us, I couldn't stop thinking about how our conversation would go.

Would we finally admit we couldn't stay away from each other, or would we call an end to things once and for all?

HAYDEN

WHILE SIPPING MY COFFEE AND WILLING MY HEADACHE TO GO away, I watched Tyler move around my kitchen as if he were familiar with it. He stood at my stove and cracked an egg into a skillet. His jeans hugged his lower half in all the right places. My gaze moved to his ass, and I couldn't stop staring even if I tried. No matter how much I told myself I had to stay away, I found I was drawn to him. Like he was some sort of light in the darkness that had consumed my life for so long.

I didn't know why it had to be Tyler because all the red flags were there telling me to stop. But each of those warnings weren't about the man himself but rather the consequences of being involved with him. Not once since I'd been single again had I wanted more than one night with someone and I didn't understand why after all these years, he came along now. And, of course, he had to be my student.

“Sunny-side up or over easy?”

My eyes flicked up to his, and I cracked a smile. “Over medium.”

Tyler grinned back and said, “Okay, I can do that.”

“Where'd you learn to cook? Doesn't your frat house have a chef?” At least we had a chef when I attended Hawkins University.

He reached into a cabinet and pulled out a plate. “Before I left for college, my mom made sure I could prepare a few things so I wouldn’t starve.”

“There’s always the campus cafeteria.”

Using a spatula, he slid the egg out of the pan and onto the plate with ease. “Yeah, I ate there when I lived in the dorms, but she insisted I learn what she considered the basics just in case.”

I grabbed the plate he had added two strips of bacon and a slice of toast with butter to. “What are the basics?”

He piled food onto his plate. “Eggs and bacon, obviously, and biscuits and gravy. Also, spaghetti, tacos, beef Wellington.”

I choked on the bite of bacon I was chewing. “Beef Wellington is basic?”

Tyler chuckled. “No, I’m just kidding.”

I cut a piece of egg and stuck it into my mouth. It had a slight nutty-buttery flavor and was delicious. “This is really good. If this is any indication of her cooking, I bet you enjoyed some great meals growing up.”

A slight frown became visible on his face as he sat at the island next to me and it gave me pause.

“Did I say something wrong?” I asked.

He shook his head as he dunked his toast into his yolk. “Not really.”

I arched a brow. “Okay ...? You just said—”

“I know. Jamie, who I call mom, is actually my stepdad’s ex-wife.”

My mind was swirling, and I wasn’t sure if it was from being slightly hungover or what, because I wasn’t putting the pieces together. He called his stepfather’s ex-wife *mom*? I didn’t have to wonder long before he cleared it up.

“My father married my stepdad, Chase, when I was fourteen. Jamie and Chase have two kids together, who I’m

super close to, and it didn't take Jamie long to slip into the mom role for me and my brother. My biological mother sucks, and I'm not close to her at all." I nodded and he continued. "Our family dynamic is a bit unusual, but"—he played with his bracelet, I'd returned to him—"that's why it meant a lot when you gave this back. It was a gift from my stepsister."

"That's awesome you all are so close." I took a sip of coffee. I wasn't going to touch the comment about his biological mother because it wasn't my place, but he was opening up to me and I didn't want to stop him. Tyler Statler intrigued me and this was another layer of who he was.

"What about you?" he asked. "Didn't your mom teach you to cook?"

I shook my head. "We were more of a takeout family because my parents worked all the time. I don't think their oven has ever been used."

"What do they do?"

"They own *The Hub Tribune*."

"Oh, is that where you work?"

On the first day of class, I'd mentioned my work as a photojournalist, but had left out the details about the media company that had been owned by my family for generations. "Yeah. And my parents were both dedicated to their careers. And once they took over for my grandfather, they ran everything. It's their baby."

"Is that why you got into photojournalism?" Tyler drank some of his coffee.

I finished a piece of bacon and nodded. "I've always had a passion for photography. It helped that I had cameras and a dark room at my disposal whenever I needed."

"That's awesome. What made you become a professor?"

"I—"

My cell rang in the other room and I got up and headed toward the sound. I couldn't remember where it was exactly,

and the ring was muffled. Following the tone, I found it in my coat pocket. It was my mom.

“Were your ears burning?” I asked when I answered the call.

“What do you mean?”

“I was just talking about you.”

“With who?”

I turned and looked at Tyler as he still sat at the island eating. Who was he? A friend? A lover? A hookup? A friend with benefits maybe? Of course he held one title that I couldn't tell anyone: student. I decided on a blanket term. “A friend.”

“A friend or a *friend*?” She emphasized the last word to give it an entirely different meaning.

“So, anyway, why are you calling?” I chuckled and changed the subject.

“Can't a mother call her son?” she teased.

I leaned against the wall and mouthed “I'm sorry” to Tyler before responding to my mom, “Yes, but we usually catch up on Monday afternoons when I'm in my office at *The Hub*. So, I'm just curious.”

“I was calling because I just got a phone call from a young man from your school.”

My heart dropped into my stomach and I bounced off the wall. “What?”

Tyler furrowed his brow, and I held up a finger.

“He's a member of Sigma Epsilon and wanted to know if we could cover a celebrity softball game they're hosting.”

“Oh,” I breathed, instantly at ease again.

“I figured since it's your school, you'd want to cover it.”

“Of course. It falls under my department too.” It was a sporting event, after all.

“Yes, of course. Just wanted you to get it on your calendar before something else came up. Hopefully, you can work it out with your team.”

“Won’t be a problem.”

“Great. See you tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

We hung up, and I said to Tyler, “Sorry. That was my mom.”

“No need to be sorry.” He stood and grabbed his plate.

“What fraternity do you belong to?” I took the plate from him, our fingers brushing and sending a tingle through my body. I swallowed and snatched mine from the island to put them both into the dishwasher.

“Sigma Epsilon. Why?”

“Is your frat hosting a celebrity softball game?”

“We are,” he replied hesitantly.

“I guess someone called *The Hub* and asked us to cover the game.”

Tyler blinked. “Oh wow. I knew we wanted some sort of media coverage, but I had no idea anyone had made the call yet.”

“Well, it looks like I’ll probably be there.”

“Really?”

I stuck the plates into the dishwasher. “Yep. I’ll move some things around if I need to.”

“Are you sure?”

“Unless you don’t want me there.”

“No. Of course I do.”

“Let me shower and then we can talk, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Unless you have somewhere to be?” I realized immediately I was assuming he could stay and wait while I cleaned up, which was an overstep, but he had cooked me breakfast and agreed to talk after we ate.

“I have a house meeting at one, but I can stay for a bit.”

“Thanks. I’ll be fast.” I took my last sip of coffee, left the empty cup on the island, and started for my bedroom. “Feel free to take a shower in the hall bathroom. There’s extra toiletries too.”

“All right. Cool. Thanks.”

I hurried to my room, stripped out of the button-up and slacks I was still wearing from the night before, and turned on the shower to let the water warm up. After brushing my teeth, I stepped into the fully tiled walk-in shower. I hurriedly soaped my body from my hair to my toes. Just as I was rinsing off, I heard the bathroom door open.

Anticipation coursed through me as I waited to see what Tyler had up his sleeve.

When he opened the foggy glass door, I turned and saw he was as naked as I was.

“Tyler,” I said with a hint of warning in my voice.

“You said last night you weren’t my professor here.”

My dick twitched at his words and the sight of him, and I swallowed hard before agreeing. “I did say that.”

The door creaked as it shut behind him and he stepped into the steam that surrounded us. “So, as I see it, if you’re not my professor here, then there’s no issue.”

I groaned as he took a step toward me. “I’m not sure it works that way.”

He dropped to his knees. “It can be our rule.”

“Tyler,” I warned again.

“Hayden.” He stared up at me with his fuck me eyes. I loved the way my name rolled off his tongue.

I closed mine, trying to make myself take a step back. But I couldn't. My dick was hardening and a split second later, Tyler grasped it in his big hand, making me groan. Fuck, this was a bad idea, but I couldn't stop. I wanted him too much and before I knew it, I grabbed a fist full of his hair and urged him to open his mouth.

He slid his hand to the base of my shaft, and as I opened my eyes, he parted his lips and I guided my cock inside.

"Fuck," I hissed as he took me to the back of his throat.

My legs wobbled as he sucked, and I leaned against the shower wall needing support as he bobbed up and down my length over and over and over. The water rained down, drenching us both, but he didn't stop as he worked me faster. My hips began to rock in sync with his movements. Shit he was good at sucking cock, and I knew if he kept it up, I wasn't going to last long.

Tyler pulled back, his lips creating a popping sound as my shaft slipped free. He looked up at me again with those irresistible blue eyes. "I want you to come down my throat."

I drew my bottom lip between my teeth, knowing we had already crossed a line, but I still couldn't stop myself from whispering, "Okay."

Without hesitation, Tyler fisted the base of my erection and took me into his mouth again. He bobbed and licked and sucked and I was on the verge of coming apart at the seams. In my thirty-three years, I'd had my fair share of blowjobs, but I couldn't remember any of them ever feeling as good as the way he was sucking me off. Fuck, I was so screwed. How were we ever going to go back to him just being my student?

We weren't.

Arching my back, I thrust into his mouth, my stomach clenching as I tried to ride out the pleasure for a little while longer.

But I couldn't hold back.

Grasping his hair again, I drove into his mouth, hitting the back of his esophagus, and before long, I was shooting my

cum down his throat like he'd wanted. He took all of it, swallowing my load as he cupped my ass and held me against his face.

Once I was spent, I pulled out slowly. He licked his lips and then stood, a satisfied grin on his face. My stomach fluttered and I pushed him against the opposite wall and devoured his mouth. I could taste my jizz as it mixed with a hint of mint and our saliva, which caused me to start getting hard again.

“Go get on the bed,” I demanded.

Another smirk graced his pretty mouth and without a word he opened the shower door and left. I turned off the water and stepped out before grabbing my towel and following the trail of water that led to my bed. The comforter was wet from Tyler's naked body, but I didn't care.

“Turn over,” I ordered and opened the nightstand drawer.

He didn't hesitate as he flipped onto his stomach and propped onto an elbow as he watched me. I used my towel to dry my shaft and then rolled a condom on. Grabbing the lube, I coated myself with long strokes while I stared at him.

“Like what you see?” he taunted, throwing my own words from our first night together back at me.

“Mhmm.” I chuckled slightly, using his same response and squirted lube onto my fingers. Stepping behind him, I ran my hand in his crack, going straight for his tight hole. “Is this what you wanted?”

“More,” he breathed.

My finger slipped a little into his asshole. “This?”

“More.”

My finger went deeper. “More?”

“Yes,” he groaned.

I slid my hand out and then went in with two fingers. “More?”

“Stop teasing and fuck me already, Hayden,” he begged.

His words shot a tingle through my body and my dick ached with the need to come again. Pulling him closer to the edge, I stayed standing and leaned over his naked backside. My erection rested against his crack and I kissed his naughty mouth as he turned his face to look back at me.

With our tongues dueling, I grabbed the base of my cock and nudged it between his cheeks. The tip pushed against his hole and I slid slowly into him. He gasped into my mouth and arched his back slightly so I could go deeper.

Once I was all the way in, I stood upright and Tyler twisted his body so he could grab his cock. He jacked himself as I thrust into him in slow, deep drives a few times.

“You like the way my dick feels inside you?”

“Yes,” he gasped.

My pace quickened forcing the headboard of my king-sized bed to bang against the wall. I almost felt feral as I rammed into him again and again. His tight muscle hugged my dick with each piston of my shaft and I went wild, giving in to all the temptation I’d tried my best to avoid the last few weeks out.

Bending over, I took his mouth again, my hips not slowing as I plowed into him.

“I’m going to come,” he groaned.

Pulling back, I slid out. “Turn over.”

Without hesitation, he did, and once he was on his back, his hand went straight to his dick. He bent his legs and I stepped forward and dove back into his tight channel. We locked eyes and as I pushed into him, I knew I was screwed. Not because of the act we were performing, but because I didn’t want whatever was happening between us now to be the last time I stared down at this man while I fucked him.

I needed more.

“Are you there?” I asked.

He nodded the best he could as he slid slightly against my comforter.

“Me too.”

I thrust a few more times and as he shot his load and I watched the white ropes paint against his smooth stomach, I lost myself. My ass cheeks clenched and I spilled my seed with a loud groan. Tyler’s legs fell apart and I leaned forward, claiming his mouth with mine and not caring as his spunk stuck to my sweaty skin.

“Tyler,” I whispered against his lips.

“Yes,” he asked between kisses.

“On campus, you’re my student. Everywhere else, we need to keep our relationship a secret. You got that.”

“Absolutely.”

“Good. Now, let’s shower again.”

WE LAY ON MY BED, BOTH OF US CATCHING OUR BREATHS AS we stared up at my ceiling after another round once we got out of the shower. We couldn’t keep our hands off of each other, and there was no way I could stop now.

“Tyler,” I called.

He turned his head and looked at me. “Yeah?”

Turning onto my side, I faced him and said, “No one can find out.”

He moved to face me too. “I know.”

“I mean it.”

“I know,” he repeated. “It’s not just about your job, but also my future too. I could get kicked out of school and then it’s four years for nothing.”

He was right. While I’d been stressing that we couldn’t be anything more because he was my student, I hadn’t stopped to consider he had a lot to lose too.

“Then are you sure about this?” I questioned.

“There’s about four more months left of school. I think we can manage to keep this a secret until after I graduate.”

“And then what?” I wondered. Were we dating? Were we just hooking up?

“I don’t know, but I’m excited to find out.” He smiled and it put me more at ease.

I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his. “Me too.”

TYLER

LOUD VOICES FILLED THE ENTRYWAY AS I PUSHED THE FRONT door open. The chapter room was directly to the right of where I stood, and several of my frat brothers were seated around the large oak table. It wasn't very often all of us were home at the same time, but no one missed a meeting unless they had an emergency.

Since I still had a few minutes before we were supposed to get started, I headed for the stairs to change out of last night's clothes.

"You just getting in?" Fallon smirked, eyeing the outfit he had seen me leave the house in the night before.

"Looks like someone got lucky last night," Preston teased as he stood next to Fallon.

Movement from inside the room caught my attention, and I noticed Ford watching us. He grimaced and a flicker of pain seemed to pass over his face before he looked down at the iPad on the table in front of him.

"Nah, man." I slapped Preston on the shoulder. "I just had too much to drink and crashed at a friend's house." Technically, that wasn't a lie since I hadn't gotten lucky the night before but rather that morning.

"Yeah, sure, and pigs can fly." Preston laughed and walked toward where some others were seated.

Fallon raised an eyebrow, and I knew he didn't buy my excuse either.

"What?" I asked, not wanting to confirm his suspicions. Since we were such close friends, it was likely he'd eventually figure out I was seeing someone, but my priority was making sure he didn't find out it was our professor.

"Nothing." He smiled, and I was grateful he didn't push the issue. "Let's get this meeting started."

"I'm going to change, but I'll be back down in a minute."

He nodded, and I ran to my room, stripping off my clothes before slipping on a white Hawkins U hoodie and a pair of black sweatpants. When I got back downstairs, the only spot left at the table was directly across from Ford. As I pulled out the chair, his gaze traveled down my body, and a hint of red colored his cheeks. It was reminiscent of how he used to look at me when we were together. I didn't want to be a dick, but I also didn't want him checking me out, so I avoided his stare and pulled out my phone, hoping he'd catch the hint I wasn't interested in whatever was on his mind.

Before I could think much more about his strange behavior, Fallon started the meeting. He went through all the regular business items and then moved on to our charity event. "We are a little more than two months away from our celebrity softball game, so I want an update from each committee, starting with Preston and Tyler. Do we have a confirmed roster?"

Preston gestured for me to speak because I had the most recent information. "We've been able to get commitments from several retired athletes and a couple of local celebrities. We currently have enough people for both teams, but I hope to get a few more on board. I can also confirm that Flirting with Fire will play a few songs after the meet and greet for all of the attendees and perform the National Anthem before the game."

Several of the guys seemed excited by my announcement. When I asked my stepdad Chase if he wanted to play in a charity softball game, he immediately agreed and offered to

ask a few of his former teammates if they were interested. Less than an hour later, he called to inform me that former World Series Champions Aron Parker, and his husband Drew Rockland, as well as their friend Slate Rodgers would love to help us with our event. As I went over the details with each of them, Slate mentioned his husband, Vaughn Evans, and his band, Flirting with Fire, would be willing to help with anything we needed, since it was for a good cause.

“It sounds like we’re set with the talent,” Fallon noted, before moving on to another committee.

After everyone had given their report, Fallon reminded us that final payments were due for our annual ski trip we were going on next weekend and then adjourned the meeting.

I followed behind as everyone made their way out of the room. I was starving and wanted to grab something to eat since I’d missed lunch before the meeting started.

Just as I was about to head to the kitchen, Ford stopped me in the hallway and asked, “Got a minute to talk?”

Figuring it would be easier to let him say whatever he needed to than to keep brushing him off, I shrugged my shoulders and replied, “Sure.”

He looked around. “Can we go to my room?”

“I guess.” I followed him up the stairs and had to hide the roll of my eyes when he looked around again before opening his bedroom door so we could walk inside.

The door clicked shut behind us, and I leaned against the wall as he sat on his bed. I waited a few moments for him to speak, but he stared at his feet instead.

“So, what’s up?” I finally asked to break the silence.

His face tilted up to look at me. “I think I made a mistake.”

My brow furrowed. “About what?”

“About breaking up with you.”

Fuck.

“Look—”

“I miss you,” he rushed out. “Do you think you could give me another chance?”

I shook my head. “I can’t.”

“If it’s because you don’t want to be in a secret relationship—”

“That isn’t the problem.” A few weeks ago, it had been, but now that I found myself in a similar position, I realized the two situations were different. With Hayden, there was a clear end date for when we no longer needed to keep our relationship a hidden from everyone, and it felt like there was a chance for a future with him. I never felt that with Ford, and even if he changed his mind and came out, it was too late for us.

“Then what is it?”

“I’ve moved on,” I admitted.

“So, you were with someone last night?” His voice cracked, and he dropped his head again.

I didn’t know how I should respond. It didn’t feel right to lie to him and give him any false hope, so I said, “Yeah,” and walked out of the room.

THE NEXT DAY, I FOUND IT NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO FOCUS ON class when Hayden looked as sexy as he did in a white button-up shirt and fitted navy slacks. Dirty thoughts of what we’d done the morning before played through my mind, and I had to adjust myself discreetly.

“If you all can pull up the article on lens conversion factor, I’ll give you a few minutes to read it. The link is on my website if you don’t have your syllabus handy.”

I opened my web browser and clicked the link. While reading, I found myself daydreaming again. Just as I was picturing myself dropping to my knees in front of Hayden, my phone vibrated.

I slid my cell under the table and clicked on the message that had just come through:

Meet me in my office after class

I'd saved Hayden's number after he'd texted me two nights before, but only used his initials in case someone happened to catch a glimpse of my phone. I looked up, but his attention was on the laptop in front of him, although I was almost positive there was a slight smirk on his face.

Me: Won't your TA be there?

HF: She has a class right after this one. Now focus on your assignment 😊

"What's got you smiling like that?" Fallon asked.

"Uh ... My brother texted me a stupid meme," I lied.

"Mmhmm. Sure."

Ignoring my friend, I placed my phone back in front of me and tried to concentrate on the article, but by the end of class, I still had no idea what we were supposed to have learned that day. Maybe my *professor* could give me a one-on-one lecture to get me caught up.

"I'll see you back at the house," Fallon said as he stood to leave after Hayden dismissed everyone.

"See ya," I replied, taking my time packing up.

I waited a couple of minutes before making my way to Hayden's office. A few students were chatting in the hallway, but none were from my class. To keep up pretenses, I knocked on the open door, peeked my head inside, and said, "Professor Foster, do you have a minute?"

"I do. Come in."

When I closed and locked the door, he rose from his seat and came toward me. As soon as he was close, I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him in so I could capture his mouth with mine.

“I think I need to transfer out of your class,” I muttered against his lips.

He pulled back immediately. “What?”

“I’m kidding. But could you try to look a little less sexy? It’s really distracting.”

He laughed. “It’s just as hard for me.”

My hand slid down until I was cupping him through his slacks. “Sure seems that way.”

“Fuck. Seriously though, we need to be careful.”

“You don’t need to lecture me about being careful. You’re the one who told me to come to your office.”

He groaned. “I know. I just needed to see you, but we shouldn’t be doing anything here.”

“Okay, well, when can I see you again?” I asked.

“Do you have plans Friday night?”

I sighed. “Yeah, I’m going on a ski trip with some guys in my frat. I’ll be gone the entire weekend.”

“Damn, I really wanted to spend some time with you.”

I frowned. I wanted to spend time with him too, but I didn’t want to bail on the trip either. Besides, it would only make Fallon more suspicious. “You could always come and get your own room.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

He glared at me. “Because we’re supposed to be keeping things between us a secret, and spending a weekend with your frat bros is the exact opposite of that.”

“I didn’t mean you’d be hanging out with us. But if you came up there, I could sneak away without making it obvious, and we could spend some time together.”

He shook his head. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Just think about it. I promise to make it worth your while.” I winked.

HAYDEN

THIS WAS A BAD IDEA.

Was I seriously considering taking a trip up to the mountains where Tyler was skiing so we could have a secret rendezvous? Fuck, I was. I just needed to get my game covered and then I could drive up for the night. If I went, I wouldn't stay at the same hotel as him and his frat guys because I didn't want to risk having a run-in with anyone who might recognize me. Even staying somewhere else was a huge risk, but I was dying to see Tyler.

It had been four days since he'd come to my office after class, and due to his school work and my schedule, we hadn't been able to meet up during the week. The more I thought about going up to where he was, the more I realized I wanted to.

While searching for a place to stay, my phone dinged with a text. I'd recently changed Tyler's name from Bracelet Guy to TS since he was more to me than just a bracelet guy now, but I still needed to keep his identity private.

TS: Just got back from the slopes. Jumping in the shower and then we're grabbing a bite. Hope you have a good night

The thought of him in the shower was enough to make up my mind.

Me: I'll pick you up after dinner

TS: Wait. What? You're here?

Me: I will be by the time you're done with dinner

TS: Are you staying at the hotel?

Me: No

I had no idea where I was staying, but the website I was looking at showed there were vacation houses available to rent the same day. I sent another text.

I'll book something and pick you up. Cool?

TS: Hell yeah. Text me when to come down and I'll slip away

I hesitated to ask the question I had, but I needed to know what his plans were.

Me: Are you staying the night with me?

It took a moment for him to text back:

Yeah, but I have to be back here by noon to get a ride home unless you want to drive me to the frat house?

Both scenarios were a risk because no matter what, there was a chance someone would see us, but dropping him off at a hotel that wasn't anywhere near campus was the better option.

Me: I'll drive you back to the hotel after breakfast

TS: Okay. I'll tell Fallon and have him cover for me until I get back

I sucked in a breath.

Me: Tell Fallon what?

TS: Don't worry. I won't tell him who I'm with

I relaxed and replied:

Okay. Let me know when you're back from dinner. I'm leaving as soon as I pack a bag

TS: Can't wait

Me: Me too 😊

SEEING AS JACK OWED ME A FAVOR, I CALLED HIM AND GOT him to cover the basketball game for me. Then, I quickly packed a leather duffle bag, grabbed the leftover pizza I had in the fridge, and headed out for the hour drive to the mountains. Tyler had texted me the hotel's name where they were staying, and then I booked a two-bedroom vacation rental for the night. It was on a lake a few miles from the ski resort, and about fifteen miles from their hotel. I was hoping it was far enough away that no one would run into us.

Granted, I didn't plan on leaving to go sightseeing or anything.

When I pulled up to the hotel, I parked as far away from the main doors as I could and sent a message to Tyler that I was there.

He texted back:

I'll be right down

I stuck a piece of gum into my mouth as I waited for him to walk outside. Once I saw him, I sent him a text to tell him where I had parked. He jogged over and slid into the passenger seat.

"I thought you were staying the night?" I asked as I noticed he didn't have a bag with him.

"I am."

“Doing the walk of shame or what?” I teased and started the engine.

“Ain’t no shame in my game.” He smirked.

“Oh, yeah? What about a change of clothes for tomorrow?”

“Seeing as I don’t plan on wearing these that long, I figured I can wear them tomorrow too.”

“Is that so?” I chuckled and pulled out of the parking spot, heading in the opposite direction of the hotel’s doors.

“At least I hope so.”

I smiled and followed the directions given by my car’s GPS. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

“Good.” He beamed.

“Did you ski or snowboard today?” I asked.

“Snowboarded.”

“Nice. I haven’t been snowboarding in a long time.”

“I’ll be sore tomorrow, that’s for sure.”

“Hopefully from other extracurricular activities too.” I winked.

“Promise?”

I groaned and stepped on the gas, wanting to get up the mountain as fast as possible. “Oh yeah.”

A few minutes down the road, I spotted a grocery store. “Since I promised you breakfast, how about I cook for you in the morning?”

“I thought you said you didn’t know how to cook.” He grinned.

“I said my mom didn’t teach me. Not that I couldn’t.”

“So, you were holding out on me the other morning?”

“No, but you didn’t appear to need my help.” I chuckled and pulled into the parking lot and into a space. “How do lemon ricotta pancakes sound?”

“Fucking delicious.”

“They are.” I smiled. “Bacon too?”

“I never pass up bacon.”

We got out of my vehicle and hurried into the market to escape the freezing cold. It felt oddly natural to walk around a grocery store with Tyler as I carried a basket and filled it with everything I needed for breakfast.

“You need all that to make pancakes?” Tyler asked, eyeing the vanilla extract, flour, granulated sugar, baking powder and baking soda.

“From scratch, yeah.”

“Damn. It looks like we’re staying an entire week,” he joked.

I chuckled. “At least I can take all this home with me so it won’t go to waste.”

“Cool. I’m going to go get some snacks. Meet you at the front?”

“Sure.”

He walked off and I went to the back of the store where the milk, ricotta cheese, butter, eggs, and bacon were. I also grabbed a bottle of vanilla creamer for coffee in the morning and then swung by the produce department for a few lemons and blueberries.

Once I got to the front of the store, Tyler had already checked out, two bags full of what looked like chips, cheese crackers and candy inside.

“Okay. Now it looks like we’re staying a week,” I teased.

“I’m a growing boy. I need snacks.”

As I was loading everything onto the conveyor belt, I thought of an item I had forgotten. I muttered, “Shit. One second,” and ran off to grab a case of water. It was true it looked like we were staying more than one night, but I liked the idea of cooking breakfast for him like he had for me. And, I was certain we would drink all of the water because I

planned on working up a sweat multiple times, and in many different ways.

AFTER GETTING BACK INTO THE CAR, WE DROVE ABOUT TEN minutes until we arrived at a picturesque two-story house. The darkness concealed the lake I had previously admired in photographs, but as we approached, an automatic light illuminated our path down the driveway.

Tyler couldn't help but chuckle. "Did you find a big enough place?"

I parked my SUV. "It was last minute."

"You had the entire week to book something," he teased.

"I know. But I'm here, right?"

His face lit up as he leaned across the center console to plant a quick kiss on my lips. "And I'm happy you came."

"Me too," I replied, a smile playing on my face.

Exiting the car, we stepped into the crisp winter night, where a meticulously shoveled pathway led to the front door. I grabbed my duffle and camera bag from the backseat while Tyler grabbed the grocery bags, and we walked to the front door. A porch light shone warmly, casting a glow over us as I entered the door code I had been provided. It unlocked with a soft click, and a rush of warmth washed over my cheeks as we stepped inside. I hadn't had the chance to turn on a light when Tyler swiftly kicked the door shut and clasped my hand.

"In a hurry?" I asked, slightly breathless as my bags slid to the floor and he set the groceries down. Apparently they could wait to be put in the fridge.

"Yes," he replied simply, his eyes gleaming with anticipation.

I wasn't about to argue with him.

With the exterior light pouring through the windows and the moon's gentle radiance above, we navigated our way to the primary bedroom. Our clothes went flying as we hurried to get naked.

As soon as my knees hit the bed, I was on my back, Tyler's gorgeous head popping up between my thighs. With a wicked grin, he kept his eyes locked on mine before slowly sliding his tongue down the length of my dick.

"Fuck, I've missed your mouth," I moaned, leaning back on my elbows.

"Yeah, how much have you missed it?" he asked between peppering kisses along each ridge of my aching cock.

"So. Fucking. Much," I gritted out, thrusting my hips to meet his lips.

"Eager for me to taste you, Professor?"

I didn't have time to respond before my hard length hit the back of his throat. The man could suck like a fucking champ.

With one hand caressing my balls, he bobbed his head up and down, bringing me close to oblivion. I didn't want to finish in his mouth; I needed to fill him and watch him come undone with me. I fisted his hair, pulling his mouth off my shaft with a loud pop.

Leaning forward, I seared his lips to mine, tasting the sweet mint on his breath as our tongues tangled together.

"Need to grab my bag. I'll be right back." I stood and hurried to the front door where everything was left. Knowing the eggs and stuff needed to be put in the fridge, I grabbed the bags and stuffed them inside the refrigerator without unpacking anything. As I walked the short distance back to the bedroom, I rummaged through my duffle and pulled out lube and a condom. "Ready for me?"

"Fuck, yeah." He leaned back, rocking his hips back as he spread his legs, grasping onto his ankles for a view of his perfect puckered hole.

Stepping forward, I slid one finger inside of him, his body clenching around me like he'd been needing it just as bad as me.

“So greedy for my touch,” I murmured, sliding another finger in.

“Mmm, yes, please fuck me, Hayden. Please,” he begged.

Not wasting any more time, I had the condom on and slick with lube. I lined up with his ass and slid slowly into him.

I loved watching his eyes widen as he took me to the hilt before he lifted his hips, eager to match my thrusts.

“You feel so fucking good inside me,” Tyler gritted.

I groaned, his words adding to my already heightened senses. I knew I wouldn't last long, so I gripped his cock, running my hands along his shaft and pumping in the same rhythm as I rocked inside him.

“Fuck, Hayden, I'm gonna come.”

“Yeah, you are.” I thrust harder.

Tyler's ass clenched, sending me over the edge as my balls tightened and I shot everything into the condom. His warm cum shot out in hot spurts between us, resting on his stomach. We stayed connected as we caught our breaths. There was something building between us that we both didn't say out loud. We couldn't. We could only be engrossed in each other behind closed doors.

And I guess I'd just have to live with that for now.

TYLER

THE SMELL OF FRESHLY BREWED COFFEE MADE MY EYELIDS flutter open. The side of the bed where Hayden had slept was empty, so I reached for my boxers on the floor and slipped them on before going to search for him.

When I reached the kitchen, Hayden stood looking out the window, wearing only a pair of red flannel pajama bottoms. I took a moment to admire his muscular back that tapered down to his trim waist and I salivated at the sight.

Fuck. Professor Foster was so sexy.

“Are you going to stand there all morning and stare at me?”

My mouth dropped open. “What?”

“I can see your reflection in the window.”

“I was just looking outside,” I teased.

“Mhmm.” He turned and smirked. “So, it was the frozen lake making you bite your lip like that?”

Busted.

“Whatever,” I grumbled playfully as I walked over to the counter to make myself a cup of coffee.

Grabbing the creamer from the fridge, I poured an ungodly amount into the mug of liquid caffeine and took a sip. I

definitely needed the jolt of energy after all the late-night sex.

“It snowed more last night than they had predicted it would,” Hayden stated.

I moved to stand next to him at the window. “Oh wow. That view is gorgeous.”

“If we have some time after breakfast, I’d like to get some pictures of the lake before we leave.”

“Well, let’s start cooking then. I’ll get the bacon going since I don’t have a clue how to make those fancy pancakes you promised me.”

Hayden smiled. “Deal.”

Thirty minutes later, we sat at the small dining table with two plates piled high with fluffy pancakes and bacon in front of us.

“Oh my god. These are fantastic,” I practically moaned after the first lemony bite. “You’re definitely on breakfast duty from now on.”

“You plan on us sharing more breakfasts?” he teased with a wink.

“If you keep making food like this, you’ll never get rid of me,” I replied, before shoving a piece of bacon into my mouth.

“Good to know.” He took a sip of his coffee, his eyes never leaving mine. “So, how are you feeling this morning? Sore?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you fishing for compliments on how well you fucked me last night?”

He choked on the bite of pancake he’d taken. “I meant from snowboarding.”

“Sure, you did.”

“Smartass.”

“You like my ass,” I retorted.

“You really do have a one-track mind, don’t you?”

“Show me a twenty-two-year-old who doesn’t.”

“Damn,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just”—he took a breath—“sometimes I forget how young you are. I know it sounds stupid since you’re my student.”

Shit. I knew my being a student had been a roadblock for us, but I hadn’t considered my age might be an issue too. “Is that going to be a problem for you?”

“Clearly not, since I’m here.” He took another bite of food.

“How old are you, anyway?” It seemed odd that we’d already slept together a few times, and I still didn’t know something as simple as his age. Now that we were dating—if that was what we were doing—we still had a lot to learn about each other.

“I’m thirty-three.”

“Damn. I didn’t realize you were that old.” I winked.

“Funny. How old did you think I was?”

I took the last sip of my coffee. “When we met, I assumed you were maybe twenty-seven or twenty-eight.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I thought you were older. I think the facial hair threw me off.”

I rubbed the side of my face. “Oh really?”

“For sure. It was quite the shock when you walked into my class on the first day. I’d spent the entire weekend thinking about you, wishing I’d gotten your name and number before you’d left.”

This was the first time we’d talked about the night we met or seeing each other at school when the semester began, and I couldn’t help but be excited that he’d wanted to see me again.

“I felt the same way after I left your house. I wanted to see you again, but finding out you were my professor wasn’t what I had in mind, that’s for sure. I remember leaving that first class disappointed because I figured any chance of being with you again was gone.”

“If I were smart, there wouldn’t have been, but ... I don’t know. There’s a connection here”—he gestured between us—“that I can’t ignore.”

A smile spread across my face. It was one thing for us to have sex because we were attracted to each other, but to hear Hayden admit it went deeper than that for him was a relief because I felt the same way. “I’m so glad I went to Chrome that night.”

“Me too,” he agreed. “But why were you in town during winter break? You didn’t go home for the holidays?”

I finished my last piece of bacon before answering. “I’d actually just gotten back that day. A few of the guys at the frat house wanted to go out, but my ex was joining them, so I stayed home. I ended up going to Chrome on a whim.”

“Is your ex a member of your frat?”

I grimaced. “Yeah. That’s how Ford and I met.”

“You live with your ex?” he asked.

Fuck. I had a feeling he wouldn’t like the answer to that question. “I do, but we weren’t together long. I’ve clearly moved on.”

“So, I was a rebound hookup?”

“At the time. Sorry—”

He held up his hand. “I’m not upset. Hell, I was just looking for a one-night stand myself. Funny how things work out.”

“Yeah.”

I made another cup of coffee while Hayden finished his breakfast. We still had a couple of hours before I needed to be back at the hotel, and I wanted to use our remaining time together wisely.

“Do you want to get dressed and grab your camera while I clean up in here?” I asked.

He nodded. “Sure. I’ll be right back.”

Thankfully, Hayden and I preferred to clean as we cooked, so when he returned a few minutes later, I was putting the last of the dishes in the dishwasher.

“Go get dressed,” he said as he put his camera on the counter. “I’ll get the dishwasher started.”

“Yes, sir,” I teased.

His eyes darkened. It seemed someone liked being called sir. “That mouth of yours is going to get you into trouble.”

“There you go, making promises again.” I smirked as I passed him.

After we put on our coats, we stepped outside onto the covered deck, and the bitter cold stole my breath. “Damn, it’s freezing out here.”

“Yeah, that’s what happens when it snows.”

“And you say I’m a smartass.”

“C’mon.” He put his camera strap around his neck. “Let’s head down.”

It took a few minutes to trudge through the snow, but when we reached the edge of the frozen water, I took a moment to take in the beauty of the landscape. “I wish I’d brought my camera.”

Hayden stood next to me. “I know it’s after hours, but I could give you a one-on-one lesson.”

I beamed at him. “I do enjoy our one-on-ones.”

“Me too.” He grinned and handed over his camera. “Given we are surrounded by nothing but snow, how about we practice white balance that we went over in class?”

“All right.” I adjusted the setting for white balance and took a few shots of the trees with the frozen lake in the background. The sun was peeking through the branches and at just the right angle, it created a sunburst. “Who knew snow could be so beautiful?”

“It is. Let me see what you captured.”

I handed him the camera and he scrolled through the few images. “Wow, Tyler. You either have a real knack for photography or I’m an excellent teacher.”

“How about both?” I teased.

“I’m really in awe every time I look at your pictures.”

My heart swelled. “Thanks, teach.” I winked.

“What happened to sir?” he challenged.

I took a step closer to him. “You really do like it when I call you sir, huh?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think we have time to act on it.” Hayden looked at his phone. “We need to leave here in an hour if I’m going to get you back in time. How about we shovel the driveway since we’re already out here and then head inside so we can warm up?”

“Sounds good to me,” I replied, but held out hope we’d have time to warm up by sharing body heat once we were done.

“According to the rental website, there’s supposed to be a shovel out here somewhere.”

“It’s probably in there.” I pointed to a small tool shed at the corner of the house.

Opening the door, I saw two shovels inside, and we each grabbed one. When we reached the driveway, I pushed the blade fully into the white powder, but then struggled to lift it. “Damn, this is heavy.”

Hayden laughed. “Have you ever shoveled snow before?”

“Uh, no,” I replied sheepishly. “I grew up in San Diego, remember?”

“Okay, Cali boy.” I bristled at the nickname. No one from California referred to it as Cali. “The key is to only partially fill the shovel.”

We got going, clearing a few feet and then Hayden said, “I hope the plow comes to clear the road soon.”

“They won’t be by until tomorrow morning,” a voice called out from the other side of the driveway.

“Are you sure?” Hayden asked the older man standing on the porch next door.

“I’ve lived here for thirty years, and they’ve never come on a Sunday,” he replied.

“Shit,” I grumbled. “What are we going to do?”

He thought for a moment. “I better call the rental company to add on another night. Looks like I’ll have to drive you home tomorrow, and I need to cancel class.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll text Fallon and ask him to grab my stuff from our room.”

“Was he the one driving you back?”

“We actually rode up with Ford,” I replied.

“The ex?”

“Yeah.” I sighed.

The drivers and who would ride with them had been arranged before winter break, and rather than change it up, which would cause questions among the brothers, Fallon and I decided to stick with the original plan of going with Ford. I didn’t think it would be a big deal. Unfortunately, Ford managed to make it awkward. Even though I’d told him I was seeing someone else, he kept stealing glances at me in the rear-view mirror while he drove, but Hayden didn’t need to know that.

“Interesting,” he muttered.

Was that jealousy I heard in his voice? “Is it?” I asked with a hint of humor in my tone so I didn’t sound like a dick calling him out.

He rolled his eyes. “Let’s go inside to warm up and take care of everything.”

When we walked in, I glanced at all the food we’d purchased the night before. “Guess it was a good thing I bought all those snacks. At least we won’t starve.”

“You’ll probably finish it all by this afternoon.”

I smirked. “Probably.”

“But I’m sure we can come up with some meals with the left-over eggs, flour, bacon and all that.”

“True. We can probably make some biscuits and gravy for dinner.”

“Sounds good to me,” he replied. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to grab my laptop and also make that call.”

While he went to the bedroom, I sat on the couch and pulled out my phone to text Fallon.

Hey! We got snowed in. I’m getting a ride tomorrow. Could you take my suitcase home?

Hayden returned and sat down next to me and began typing on his computer.

Fallon: Are you good? Use our code word if you need me to send help 😊

Me: We don’t have a code word jackass!

Fallon: Maybe we should if you’re going to sneak off into the mountains with strangers LOL

I laughed and messaged back:

I’m fine. See you tomorrow

“What’s so funny?” Hayden asked as I set my phone down on the coffee table.

“Fallon was just being ridiculous.”

“About what?”

“Asking if I’m in danger.”

“Are you?” He smirked.

“Not the bad kind.” I winked.

“Ah.” He cleared his throat. “Well, we’re all set with the house, and the email is scheduled to go out to the class a little later. I didn’t think it would be good for Fallon to get your text and then my email right away.”

“Good call.”

“So, now that we’re stuck here, whatever will we do?” He had a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“Oh, I don’t know.” I paused, pretending to give it some thought. “I seem to remember you making a comment about my smart mouth. Maybe I should remind you how much you love it, *sir*.” I slid to my knees in front of him.

My cock strained behind my zipper as Hayden spread his thighs apart, letting me push my body between his outstretched legs.

“I think there’s definitely something you could do with that mouth,” he said, undoing his belt and jeans before his dick bobbed free.

I kept my heated gaze on his as I slid my tongue just over the tip, lapping up the precum already gathered there.

He groaned, leaning his head back against the cushion. “Fuck. That wicked tongue. It feels amazing.”

Even though I was the one on my knees, I had the power to control his pleasure and I loved every single second of it.

I slid my lips down his shaft before running my thumb along his balls and back to his taint. His hips immediately jerked forward, ready for me to take him all in. But I couldn’t help teasing him a little more.

My tongue followed the same trail as my thumb, going over his balls and flicking the sensitive spot just behind them.

“Fuck,” he groaned again.

Finally, I took him deep into my mouth, my lips tingling around his hard cock.

He lifted his pelvis, pushing me to my limits as my throat constricted around his tip. He was hungry for more; as hungry

as I was for his release.

“You suck me so good, Tyler,” he gritted through his teeth. He pumped his hips harder, fisting his fingers through my hair, and I widened my throat, and let his thick rod slide all the way down until I gagged on his length.

“You’re such a beautiful sight,” he murmured before thrusting harder.

Tears stung my eyes as I kept going, and I eventually felt his balls tighten.

Warm, salty spurts hit the back of my throat and I swallowed every bit of him down before releasing him and catching my breath.

We both sat there, panting, and then Hayden offered me his hand. “Come on, let’s clean up in the shower.”

“But what if I don’t want to be clean?” I smirked.

He grinned. “We can get dirty again in there.”

AFTER A ROUND OF MIND-BLOWING SEX IN THE SHOWER AND A short nap, we rolled out of bed and searched for something to occupy our time. Finally, we found a closet full of board games and pulled down the classic version of Monopoly.

“So, what do you plan on doing after graduation?” Hayden asked as he counted out the fake money.

“I’m hoping to find an internship as a music journalist somewhere. I’ve always loved music, but I don’t see myself having a career as a performer. Writing about my passion seemed like the perfect fit.”

“Will you stay here or move back home?”

I shrugged. “I guess it depends on where I find work, but right now, it looks like I’ll be going back to California.”

He was quiet for a moment, and I wondered if he had the same concerns I did about how living on opposite coasts

would make it difficult to maintain a relationship. Of course, it was way too early to worry about stuff like that.

“I’m sure you’ll find something great,” he finally said.

We spent the rest of the afternoon playing games and getting to know each other, although we steered the conversation away from heavy topics and things having to do with the future.

When night fell, we found ourselves wrapped up in each other again, and I couldn’t remember ever having a better weekend.

SURE ENOUGH, THE PLOW CAME THROUGH EARLY THE NEXT morning, and Hayden and I got on the road. The hour drive home passed in a blur, and before I was ready for our time together to end, he was stopping down the street from the Sigma House.

“I’m really glad you decided to come up this weekend. I had a great time.”

He smiled. “Me too. I’ll call you, and maybe we can meet up later this week?”

“I’d like that,” I said, and even though the ball cap and sunglasses he wore made it difficult, I leaned in and kissed him goodbye.

After getting out of the car, I hurried down the couple of blocks to where I lived. The house was silent when I walked in since everyone was in class. I checked the time, and if I rushed, I could shower and still make it to my Music Industry Analysis class.

“Oh, good. I don’t have to send out a search party,” Fallon called out as I passed his room.

Shit. I forgot he would be home since Hayden had canceled class. I turned back and stopped at his door. “Nah, I’m all good.”

“Lucky for you, Professor Foster had to cancel class this morning.”

“Uh ... yeah. I saw his email.”

He laughed. “Maybe he got stuck in the snow too.”

My mouth popped open, and I tried to think of a witty comeback, but my mind went blank.

Fallon looked at me, his eyes widening. “Wait ...”

I looked down at my feet, still at a loss for words.

“Is that who you were with?” he pressed.

“Look—”

“Holy shit! You’re fucking our professor?”

I stepped into his room and slammed the door behind me. I was pretty sure no one else was home, but I couldn’t be too careful. “Keep your voice down.”

“When did this start?”

Since he’d already put two and two together, I figured there was no harm in telling him. Maybe he wouldn’t think it was such a big deal if he knew it started before Hayden was our teacher. “We hooked up the night I went to Chrome at the end of winter break. I had no idea he worked at the school. Hell, we didn’t even tell each other our names that night.”

“You guys have been messing around for almost two months?”

“No. I mean, kinda.” I shook my head. “It’s a long story. Please don’t tell anyone. He could lose his job, and I could get kicked out of school.”

“No shit.”

“Please,” I begged.

He let out a sigh. “Of course, I won’t tell anyone. Just be careful.”

“I will, and I appreciate you keeping this between us.”

“Not a problem.” He stood. “I’ve got to head over to campus for class. I’ll see you later.”

“Later,” I said as we both walked out of his room.

For a moment, I considered texting Hayden that Fallon knew. But I didn’t want him to freak out and break up with me since I was positive my friend wouldn’t spill the beans.

At least I hoped he wouldn’t.

HAYDEN

Mr. Statler,

*Please see me in my office before class to discuss
last week's photo assignment.*

- Professor Foster

IT HAD BEEN A WEEK SINCE I'D SEEN TYLER. HE HAD BEEN busy with school and fraternity stuff and I had my work to do too. We had texted, but that was it. No phone calls, no seeing each other, and I hadn't expected to miss him, but I had. And honestly, it terrified me.

It wasn't because of our secret relationship. It was because I was starting to have feelings for him. Feelings I had tried to avoid since Jonah.

But I couldn't stay away.

I hit send on the email and then jumped into the shower to start my day. Luckily, the class I'd had to cancel the week before had little I needed to lecture on. In the email I'd sent to the students, I had instructed them to pick three shooting scenarios from a list and photograph them with a self-critique of the images. The list included press conferences, political

events, sporting events, food photography, sensitive or intimate settings, protests and demonstrations, street photography, and portraits. Each student emailed me their photos with their write ups and then I replied with my assessment and grade. Except, my email to Tyler also asked him to see me in my office instead.

Some students had taken portraits of their friends, pictures of a meal, and photos of people in the streets around town. Fallon, since his dad was a U.S. senator representing Massachusetts had covered a press conference he spoke at. He'd also taken a portrait of his father in his office and captured one of Tyler taking a photo.

My heart had skipped a beat when I'd scrolled down and saw a photo of my boyfriend in Fallon's email because not only was it of Tyler, but he was sitting on the ledge of a building, taking pictures of the street below. The photographer in me had to give him props for creativity, but the boyfriend in me hated to see him in what might be a dangerous situation. The kicker was, none of the photos Tyler had submitted were of what he had been shooting from the rooftop. They were of his food (it seemed the entire class loved taking pictures of their food), a guy reading, and a street photograph of a painter leaning against a building, smoking a cigarette and surrounded by paint buckets and rollers.

All three photos were almost captured perfectly, and I'd given him a 98% on the assignment. Since he wasn't just *any* student of mine, I wanted to go over his work in person. Plus, I wanted some one-on-one time with him.

It was a risk to be alone with him in my office, but I couldn't resist.

Once I got to school, I made my way to Miller Hall. As I expected, Isabelle was at her desk.

"Good morning," I sang. "Have a good weekend?"

"I did. You?"

Would have been better if I hadn't been alone at home.
"Covered a Celtics game, but yeah, it was good. Sorry about

last week. Hopefully, you slept in.” I set my bags down on my desk.

“I did. It was awesome.” She smiled. “But everything is okay with you?”

“Yeah.” I took out my laptop. “I got caught in a snowstorm and the roads weren’t cleared until Monday morning.”

“Oh wow. You went skiing?”

“No. Just some R&R.” Technically, there was very little rest, seeing as Tyler and I hadn’t slept a lot because we were busy doing *other* things. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the one person I couldn’t stop thinking about approaching. “But that was last week and this morning, I could use more coffee. Would you mind grabbing us each a cup and then meeting me in the classroom?”

“Sure.” She stood.

I grabbed my wallet from my back pocket and pulled out some cash. “Get something to eat too if you’d like.”

“Thanks, Professor Foster.”

“No, thank you.” I looked toward the door. “Mr. Statler.”

“You wanted to see me?” Tyler asked.

“Yes. Please come in.” I gestured toward the chairs in front of my desk.

Isabelle grabbed her stuff and left. Once she walked out of the department and I could no longer see her, I closed the door. Without a word, I pulled Tyler to me and crushed my lips to his.

“Whoa, Professor Foster.” Tyler lightly pushed at my chest once we broke apart. “This is inappropriate.”

“Shut up.” I pecked his smirking lips and stepped back. “Have a good weekend?”

“Would have been better if I’d been with you.”

“I feel the same way.” I smiled.

He moved in again, our mouths connecting once more. I felt as though we were trying to make up for the last seven days, and I suppose we were. At least, I was. How had Tyler Statler gotten embedded so far into my soul that I craved him this much?

For a week now, I'd been thinking obsessively about what would happen after graduation. In a perfect world, we would be free to go public with our relationship. That, finally, after all my thirty-three years, I could be out in the open with a boyfriend. That I would not have to hide because someone had a problem with the person I was dating. Or if someone did, I wouldn't care because no one could tell me I couldn't be with him. No sports stigma would be floating over our heads and no dean would be ready to fire me for dating a student. It would be me and him and ... California.

That was the other issue.

Tyler had mentioned that after he graduated, he was probably going back home. If he did, the move would put three thousand miles between us, and with my already busy schedule, how could we make that work? Would he want to make it work? Would I?

Maybe he was the one I needed in my life now to make me realize I didn't need to guard my heart anymore. That it was okay finally to let someone in after Jonah. To feel love and pleasure and the yearning to be with someone every waking minute.

Or he could be *the one*.

In the last couple of months we'd been having our little secret affair, Tyler had started to consume me. I had an idea of how to make us work, but it all hinged on him and if he really wanted to move back to San Diego. But I wasn't going to ask just yet. We still had some time to see where our relationship went before we needed to make any decisions. After all, he was eleven years younger and had his entire life ahead of him.

We were so caught up in our kiss that I barely heard the knock on the door. We pulled apart just in time to see Charlotte step inside.

“Hayden, are you—Oh, sorry. I didn’t . . .” She paused, her head tilting slightly as she took in our appearance.

I glanced at Tyler, his mouth a little red from our make-out session. *Fuck*. “Yeah? What’s up?”

“Sorry, I didn’t know you were with a *student*.” She said the last word in a way that told me she knew he was the one I’d mentioned to her before. *Double fuck*.

I rubbed the back of my neck nervously. “We’re just about to go over his last assignment. Something I can help you with?”

“I was just delivering this.” She held out a white envelope, and I took it from her. “Invitation to my wedding.”

I beamed. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Great. And”—her eyes cut to Tyler—“let me know if you’re bringing a date.”

“Will do.”

Charlotte turned and closed the door behind her, leaving me and Tyler alone again.

“She knows,” I stated, my palms becoming sweaty.

“It didn’t seem like she cared. She practically invited me to her wedding.”

“Fuck, she knows,” I repeated and paced in a circle the best I could in my ten-by-ten office.

“Can you talk to her?”

“Yeah.” I sighed and glanced at the clock. “I need to, but we also have to head to class.”

Tyler moved toward me and placed his hands on my shoulders, pulling my focus back to him. “Let’s not freak out until after you talk to her. It seems like you two are close since she invited you to her wedding.”

“We are,” I confirmed.

“When’s the wedding?”

“This summer,” I responded. I had it marked on my calendar already because Charlotte had given me a Save the Date card, but I hadn’t opened the invitation yet and didn’t recall the actual day off the top of my head.

“Oh.” Tyler’s shoulders sagged.

“Why? You wanna be my date?” I leaned against my desk, my arms and legs crossed.

“Well ... maybe.” He lifted a shoulder. “That is after graduation.”

“It is, but you’ll probably be in California, right?”

He nodded with a tight smile.

I pulled him to me. I uncrossed my legs and he moved to stand between them. “Maybe you can fly in for the weekend. We’ll see what happens.”

“Right.”

I kissed him softly. “What are you doing for Spring Break? We can go—”

“I’m going home for my sister’s sixteenth birthday.”

“Oh.” My shoulders sagged as his had earlier. Fucking California and the miles between here and there.

“Maybe—”

My alarm on my phone chimed, telling me it was time to walk to class. “We gotta go, but we can talk about this later. Can you come over tonight? I’ll make you dinner.”

“Yeah, I’ll make it work.”

“Good.” I stood. “And we can talk about you shooting on a ledge of a building and then not using the photo for your assignment.”

His mouth dropped open. “How do you know about that?”

I stuck my laptop into my bag. “Why don’t you go on ahead to class and ask Fallon?”

Tyler’s brow furrowed. “Okay ...?”

“No, seriously. Go to class and I’ll be behind you. We can’t be seen together.” Well, we could because it wasn’t as if we would hold hands, but I didn’t want to take the chance of someone getting suspicious, and I still needed to talk to Charlotte.

“Yes, *sir*.” He opened the door and winked back at me, then strode out of the office.

I followed behind him, but stopped at Charlotte’s office door, knocking twice to get her attention. She looked up from her laptop and I shut the door behind me. “I know—”

She held up her hand. “It’s none of my business.”

“But—”

“From what you told me, it started before the semester began. I get it, and like I said, not my business. School will be over in a few months, anyway. Just be careful, okay? Lock the door next time.”

“Right.” I smiled tightly, realizing I should have done that.

“But is he your plus one?” She grinned.

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Then maybe I should hire a photographer after all.”

ON THE WAY TO CLASS, I’D TEXTED TYLER THAT THINGS WERE good with Charlotte, and throughout my lecture about the students’ midterm portfolio, we shared stolen glances. He would either bite his lower lip, run his tongue over it too, or wink at me. He knew what he was doing, and for the rest of the day, I couldn’t stop thinking about his mouth around my dick.

I had just put the lasagna in the oven and set a timer for forty minutes when my doorbell rang.

Striding to the door, my heart hammered excitedly in my chest.

Tyler Statler was definitely getting to me.

Without looking to make sure it was him, I unlocked and opened the door. On the other side was the man I wanted to lecture after hours.

“Hayden,” he greeted.

I grabbed a fistful of his jacket and pulled him inside. “Get in here.”

With no more words, our clothes went flying and for the next forty minutes, Tyler used his wicked mouth on me, and then some.

TYLER

FOR THE FIRST THREE YEARS OF COLLEGE, I'D GONE ON typical spring break trips. When I was a freshman, I went to Miami, then a group of us went to Mexico my sophomore year, and last time we headed to Myrtle Beach. All of those trips had been a blast, filled with everything one would expect: sunshine, hookups (except in Mexico when I had a boyfriend), and plenty of alcohol.

This year I was headed home and had mixed emotions about it. I couldn't wait to hang out with my parents and siblings, but I also couldn't help but wish I could spend time with Hayden. Unfortunately, with our busy schedules, we struggled to find time to be together, and knowing we could only talk on the phone for the next week while I was in San Diego was a bummer.

As the plane pulled up to the gate, I texted my dad to let him know I'd landed and then sent another to Hayden to let him know I arrived safely. He'd covered a Celtics game earlier, so I assumed he was home. But it was after midnight in Massachusetts, so I didn't know if he'd reply or not.

Once I had my bags from baggage claim, I headed outside to where my father had texted he'd be waiting. I spotted him right away as I exited the double doors and he hopped out of his Cadillac Escalade to greet me.

“Hey, bud.” Dad wrapped his arms around me. “I’m glad you’re home.”

I returned his embrace. “Me too.”

After I threw my bags into the back, we climbed into his SUV and began the thirty-minute drive home.

“Are Dylan and Jase home yet?” I asked as my father pulled onto the freeway.

“Yeah. Gotta say, I’m pretty excited to have all our kids under the same roof for a couple of days.” He beamed.

Dylan and Jase were going back to UCLA the day after Cammie’s party because of baseball.

“We were all here in December,” I reminded him.

“Yeah. That was way too long ago.”

I laughed. To say my father’s world revolved around his kids was putting it mildly, and when he and Chase had gotten together, that fatherly attention had extended to Jase and Cammie too. I’d seen a couple of friends struggle when their parents remarried and blended their families, and I was grateful that hadn’t been the case for us.

“Is Cammie at the house?”

“She’s with Jamie tonight since they had some last-minute stuff to do for the party, but she’s coming over in the morning.”

Our dads were hosting her sweet sixteen at their place on the beach. From what I’d heard, it was going to be a huge party.

As we drove up the I-5, my phone vibrated.

HF: Hope you have fun. I already miss you

I quickly responded:

Me too but I’m surprised you’re still awake

HF: I was in the shower when you texted, but in bed now

Me: Great. Now I'm thinking of you naked 😊

HF: Is that a bad thing?

Me: Uh yeah, since I'm in the car with my dad

HF: LOL Go spend time with your family. Call me tomorrow when you're alone

Me: Will you be naked in bed then too?

HF: Maybe 😊

Dad chuckled, and I quickly flipped over my phone, hoping like hell he hadn't caught a glimpse of our messages. "What's so funny?"

He glanced at me and then focused back on the road. "You've got that goofy 'I'm in love' look on your face."

I shook my head. "I'm not in love."

It was too soon for that kind of declaration, although I had to admit that since our weekend at the lake house, it felt like things between us had changed from mainly sexual to something more. Every stolen moment we spent together, I felt myself fall for Hayden a little bit more. And I'd even started to think about how to make a long-distance relationship work after graduation because the only thing I was sure of was that I couldn't give him up.

"But you're seeing somebody?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"That's it?"

"What do you mean?"

"That's all you're going to tell me?"

I shrugged. "It's new." Since we couldn't be out in the open yet, I was hesitant to say too much and open myself up to more questions.

Unfortunately, being evasive didn't stop my dad from continuing his interrogation. "Did you meet at school?"

That was a loaded question. I didn't think my father, who was also a teacher, would be thrilled to learn I was dating my professor, but at least I could answer his question truthfully. "No, we met at a club."

"Well, you look happy. I know things were a bit rough when you were here for winter break."

"I'm definitely happy." I could admit that much to him.

"That's all that matters."

We pulled up to the house and the second I walked through the door, Chase pulled me in for a hug. "We've missed you."

"I missed you too," I said before stepping back and moving over to hug Dylan and Jase.

"What's up?" I greeted them.

"Not much," Jase replied. "Glad to have a couple days off from practice and games. This semester is kicking my ass."

"Midterms sucked, man," Dylan added.

"Tell me about it," I agreed.

"Go put your stuff in your room and then come join us out back for a beer. I'll get the fire pit going," Chase said.

I dragged my suitcase upstairs to my room and went to the bathroom. As I came out, Dylan peeked his head out of his room.

"Hey, got a second to talk?"

"Yeah, man. What's up?"

I walked into his room and he closed the door behind him, which instantly made me worry something was wrong.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Uh ... yeah. I'm fine." He took a deep breath and sat on the edge of his bed. "I'm meeting Lisa for breakfast tomorrow."

"What?" I snapped. "I thought you didn't want to see her?"

My nails dug into my palms as I clenched my hands. Even after all this time, my mother's behavior still had a profound effect on me. My dad, and later Chase and Jamie, made sure I always felt loved and cared for, but there was still a little boy inside of me who wondered why his mom couldn't love him enough to try to be a better parent.

"I don't ... I mean, I didn't, but she's been persistent about wanting to get together." He hung his head and fiddled with the bracelet on his wrist that matched mine. "You probably think I'm an idiot."

I sat next to him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "I don't think you're an idiot. I don't trust Lisa, but you gotta do what feels right for you."

"Yeah, I feel like this is what I need for some closure, honestly."

That made sense, and if it helped him not to carry any regret for cutting her out of his life, then I fully supported him. "Well, I've got your back, bro."

He looked up and smiled. "I was hoping you'd say that because I was wondering if you wanted to go with me?"

I reeled back. "What? Why?"

"Forget it. I shouldn't have asked." He tried to stand but I stopped him by grabbing his wrist. "You've made your feelings about her very clear."

"If you want me there, then I'll go." I released him.

"Thanks." He walked to the door.

"Are you going to tell Dad?" I asked, following him.

"I probably should."

"Let him have a beer first," I suggested. Our father wouldn't be happy to know we were meeting with Lisa. It wasn't that he tried to dictate what sort of relationship we had with her, but rather he'd worry since he'd witnessed all the emotional trauma she'd inflicted on us over the years.

We headed outside to join our dads and brother by the fire. I stopped at the mini fridge in the corner where I knew they kept the beer. “Anyone need one?” I asked, holding a bottle of Coors Light in the air.

“I do,” Dylan and Jase said in unison.

“Anyone over the age of twenty-one?” I teased, but still grabbed them each one.

Chase laughed. “I’m sure they drink harder shit at school.”

“We sure as hell did,” my dad added. “And I’ll take another.”

I handed out the bottles and took a seat.

The five of us chilled for a bit, catching each other up on what we’d been doing the last few months.

We’d just finished a second round of beer when Dylan said, “So, um”—he looked at me and I gave him an encouraging nod—“I’m meeting Lisa for breakfast tomorrow.”

Dad raised an eyebrow. “You are?”

“Yeah.” Dylan picked at the label on his bottle, not looking at anyone.

“Hey, I’m not upset,” Dad affirmed, placing a hand on Dylan’s knee.

My brother raised his head. “You’re not?”

“Of course not. I just worry about you. But I’ll always support the decisions you make when it comes to your mother,” he said, echoing my thoughts from earlier.

“I’m going with him,” I added, hoping that would alleviate some of our father’s concern.

“Really?” Chase asked. “Now I’m sorta worried for Lisa.”

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, we all chuckled. Chase had had a front row seat to the drama that had gone down years ago, and knew exactly how I felt about that woman.

We continued chatting for a while, but eventually called it a night since we all had a lot going on the next day.

After a quick shower, I climbed into bed, but sleep didn't come easy as the worry about facing Lisa gnawed at me.

THE NEXT MORNING, DYLAN AND I TOOK OFF AFTER PROMISING to be back in time to help with the party prep.

Both of us were quiet on the way to the diner where Lisa had wanted to meet, and when my brother pulled into the parking lot, we both hesitated to get out. My leg was bouncing and my palms began to sweat.

"Maybe this wasn't a good idea," he said, staring at the restaurant in front of us.

Despite my own discomfort about being there, I wanted to put my brother at ease. I squeezed his shoulder and said, "We can leave anytime, okay?"

"Yeah." He sighed. "I'm really glad you came with me."

"You know I'd do anything for you."

He nodded. "I know. Thank you."

After a few more seconds, we both climbed out of the car and headed inside. My heart was pounding, so I took a couple of deep breaths in an effort to calm down. The place was busy since it was a Saturday morning, but it didn't take long to spot Lisa sitting at a booth in the corner. Her eyes widened the moment she spotted us, and I wondered if it was because she hadn't expected me to be there.

As we got closer to her table, it felt as though the walls were closing in on me as I imagined every way this meeting could go wrong.

"Hey," Dylan mumbled as he slid into the seat opposite Lisa and made room for me to sit beside him.

Even though she hadn't seen either of us in years, she made no effort to stand and hug us. Not that I would have reciprocated, but what kind of woman pushes to see her kids, and then doesn't show any sort of excitement when they walk in?

"This is a surprise," she said, glancing at me dismissively before returning her attention to my brother. "I didn't know I was going to see both of my boys today."

My boys ... We weren't her anything.

"Well, Tyler and I have some errands to run for our sister's birthday after we're done here, so I invited him along."

"Your sister?" She looked confused. "Wait, do you mean Chase's kid?"

Our dad and Chase's wedding had gotten some news coverage since Chase was a former MLB player and current sports analyst. Since he'd played with her most recent ex-husband, Miguel, I assumed she had been aware of their marriage.

"Yes, our sister," I reiterated.

Lisa rolled her eyes, but before I could call her out, our server came over and placed some silverware on the table. "Hi there. My name is Rochelle and I'll be taking care of you this morning. What can I get you all to drink?"

We each ordered coffee and then scanned our menus. The silence was becoming uncomfortable, and Dylan must have thought so too, because he finally asked, "So why'd you want to get together?"

"Can't a mother just want to see her son?" I huffed out a laugh at her use of *son* instead of *sons*, and she glared at me. "Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Seriously?" I asked. "What's changed? You never made much of an effort to see us when we were kids."

"Your father kept you from me," she whisper-yelled.

With the worst possible timing, our server returned with our coffee. "Are you ready to order, or do you need a few

more minutes?”

“Yeah, we need more time,” I replied and couldn’t help but think if the conversation continued down the path it was on, then Dylan and I probably wouldn’t stay long enough to eat.

When the waitress walked away, Dylan looked at Lisa and said, “You know that’s not true. We made the choice not to visit you.”

“Which I still don’t understand,” she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Maybe because you and your new husband didn’t want to give us back after that one visit in Texas. You talked shit about Dad and Chase the entire time we were with you,” my brother retorted.

She waved him off. “Your dad made a bigger deal out of that whole incident.”

“Bullshit.” I was seething. “Miguel was a homophobic asshole and you went along with everything he said.”

“He just didn’t think Gage and Chase being together was the best environment for you boys. But after I came to visit you by myself, you guys still didn’t want to see me.”

My brother sat up straight. “Because you tried to make excuses for your husband and continued spouting the same shit as Miguel had. Did you really think we wanted to spend time listening to you insult the people we love?”

“Look, I’m not here to talk about your father. And I’m not going to apologize for thinking his lifestyle wasn’t a good influence on impressionable young boys.”

“His lifestyle? You really are clueless, aren’t you?” Dylan growled. “Gage Statler was and is a better parent than you could ever dream of being. It’s because of his *influence* that we didn’t end up fucked up from your toxic behavior.”

Lisa’s face turned pale because Dylan rarely argued back when we were kids. “I thought I was doing the right thing.” Her eyes filled with tears that were likely as fake as her blonde hair.

“Well, you were wrong,” I added. “The things you said and did made me scared to come out when I was a kid. A mother should never make her child feel ashamed of who he is.”

“You’re a gay?” she asked me, and there was no mistaking the disgust in her voice.

A gay? What the actual fuck? It was clear she hadn’t changed despite not being with Miguel anymore.

“Yes, I’m gay, and quite happy with my boyfriend.” It hadn’t been my intention to tell her anything, especially that I was dating someone, but I hadn’t been able to stop myself.

“See, that’s exactly what I was worried about.” She threw her arms in the air. “I should have kept you boys in Texas with me. Then maybe my son wouldn’t be a—”

Dylan slammed his hand on the table, causing a few patrons to turn and stare at us. “We’re done. I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt, but I should have known better.”

We both slid out of the booth, but Lisa called out, “Wait, Dylan. Don’t go.” I guessed that after my announcement I no longer mattered to her. “I asked you to come to breakfast for a reason.”

Dylan stopped but didn’t sit back down. “And what reason could that be?”

“It’s just that things have been really hard since my divorce.” She picked at the paper napkin in front of her. “And I was wondering if maybe I could borrow some money.”

I couldn’t stop the humorless laugh that escaped. “You’re unbelievable. Let’s go take care of that stuff for the party *Mom* asked us to do and then go home.”

Dylan nodded, but Lisa wasn’t finished.

“Mom?” she screeched. “Who are you talking about?”

“Jamie, Chase’s ex-wife,” Dylan answered without further explanation.

“So, you’re willing to drop everything and help people who aren’t even your real family, but you can’t help the one

who actually carried you around for nine months? And don't you dare ever call her Mom again."

"Jamie is our mom and the only one we need," I shot back. "She was there after you refused to be our mother. We'll do anything for her because she would do the same for us. And when you're sitting at home alone, wallowing in your own selfishness, remember it was your actions that caused your sons not to have a relationship with you."

"Don't bother trying to reach out again. I won't answer," Dylan added, and then we walked away.

Once we were back in the car, I turned to my brother and asked, "Are you okay?"

He turned to face me. "I'm fine, but what about you? The way she acted was unacceptable and I shouldn't have subjected you to that."

"Hey, don't worry about it. You have no control over her actions, and I wouldn't have wanted you to deal with her on your own."

He nodded. "Thanks. At least I can move forward without any regrets."

I reached over and hugged him. It was a relief knowing that chapter of our lives was truly over.

CAMMIE'S PARTY WENT OFF WITHOUT A HITCH AND EVERYONE seemed to have a great time. It was fun getting to spend time with my grandparents and other family and friends I hadn't seen since Christmas. Even our parents' friends Aron and Drew, who Chase used to play baseball with, made an appearance. After it was over, we all crashed, exhausted from the festivities.

The next afternoon Jase and Dylan headed back to UCLA with a promise to see me at my graduation.

“Hey,” my dad called as I raided the fridge for some leftovers from the party. “Chase and I are meeting Aron and Drew for dinner before they fly back home. Do you want to go with us?”

Cammie had gone to Disneyland with some friends, and Aron and Drew’s twins had stayed in San Francisco with their grandparents. If the girls had been there, I would have considered going, but as it was, I really didn’t want to be the third wheel on what would essentially be a double date. Besides I could think of something much more exciting to do with everyone gone.

“I think I’m going to chill here, if that’s okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. You want us to bring you anything back?”

I laughed, looking at the multiple containers of food in the fridge. “Nah. I can find something here.”

“We may have gone overboard with the catering.”

“You think?” I teased.

“Hey, it’s not every day your little girl turns sixteen.”

Ah man, he was getting emotional. Both he and Chase had shed a few tears while watching my sister the night before.

“I know Cammie appreciated everything you did to make her party special.”

“Thanks.” He smiled and then headed upstairs.

Once my dads left, I ran to my room and video-called Hayden. It rang twice before he answered.

“Hi there,” he greeted with a smile on his face. It looked like he was sitting at his desk in his home office. “I was just thinking about you.”

“Oh really?” I smirked. “What exactly were you thinking?”

“How I wish you were here with me.”

“And what would we do if I was?”

His smile turned devilish. “You’d be naked in my bed and I’d have my way with you.”

“You mean like this?” I angled the camera so he could see that I was lying in bed naked.

“Fuck,” he hissed. “Yeah, just like that.”

Suddenly all I could see was his ceiling, and I heard some rustling before he appeared back on my screen. He was now shirtless and had moved to his couch.

“That’s better,” I breathed out. “But I think you need to move the camera down a little.” He did as I’d instructed, and I was rewarded with a perfect view of his hand wrapped around the base of his hardening dick. “Damn, that’s hot. Now tell me exactly what you’d do if I was next to you.”

HAYDEN

MY LIFE BEFORE I MET TYLER WAS ... *FINE*. I SHOT MY sporting events, came home and edited the photos before sending them off to my sportswriter, taught one day a week at Hawkins, and that was that. I was content with the life I'd made since Jonah's death. But since Tyler and I had been together, I wanted more.

More kisses.

More cuddles.

More time.

But Tyler was in California and we had no time at all.

The phone sex we'd had the night before, while enjoyable, was nothing compared to feeling his body pressed against mine, and it only made me want to be with him more. To go to California and soak up the sun while we lay on the beach. To walk hand in hand where no one knew us and HU wouldn't find out. To wake up next to him like I had the two mornings we had spent up in the mountains alone.

Spring Break was becoming the longest week of my life.

Lost in thought, it took me a moment to realize my phone was ringing. I picked it up and slid my finger across the answer button. "Hey, Jack. What's up?"

“Amanda’s water just broke and we’re on our way to the hospital.”

“Congrats, man. That’s awesome.” I could hear his wife howling in the background, so maybe it wasn’t awesome for her just yet.

“Thanks, but ah, I’m supposed to be on a flight to LA in the morning to shoot the Bruins and Ducks game in Anaheim.” I sat up straight. “Emmett Cooper might score his 300th goal and I wanted to be there to capture it.”

“I’ll go,” I blurted without hesitation.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Not a problem. Don’t worry about anything except your family.” I was already opening my laptop to look for flights.

“Great, thank you. She’s not due for two more weeks, so we weren’t prepared for this. I can call the hotel and have the room switched to your name.”

“Only if you have time.”

“I’ll have Manda do it.”

“Do what?” she groaned in the background.

I wasn’t sure if he was joking or not.

“I’ll text you the info,” Jack said without answering his wife.

“All right. Thanks. And congrats again.”

“Thank you.”

My computer booted up, and I went straight to the site I used to book my flights. One left for Santa Ana, California, at seven in the morning with a short layover in Charlotte, North Carolina. Checking the Bruins’ schedule, I saw that the game was at 7:30 p.m. and that would give me enough time to rent a car and find a hotel in case the one Jack had booked didn’t pan out.

I contemplated surprising Tyler, but after looking up how far away Anaheim was from San Diego, I thought better of it. I sent a text to him:

I'm coming to California to cover the Ducks game tomorrow. Could you meet up with me?

I left my office and went to my bedroom to pack. A few minutes later, my phone chimed with a reply.

Maybe. I'd have to see if I can use my dad's car

Me: I'm renting a car and can pick you up. You could stay with me in my hotel and I can drive you back before my flight home? I'll book a late one out

It was a lot of driving, but if that was the only way I could see him, I didn't care.

After a few minutes, he replied:

Yeah. I'll just tell my parents I'm going to hang with my friends

It stung a little seeing him say I was a friend, but I understood. It sucked, but I got it, and was counting down the days until we could tell everyone we were together.

Me: Ok. I'll fly in and out of San Diego and we can drive to Anaheim for the game. You can come as press and shoot the game too. It will be good practice, so bring your camera

TS: Sweet. I'd love that!

Me: A little after hours lecture 😊

TS: The best kind of lecture 😊

I chuckled and replied:

I'll send you my flight details soon

TS: Ok cool. Can't wait. I miss you

His last three words put a smile on my face.

Me: I miss you too baby

TS: You're making me want to video call you again

Me: Do it. Packing can wait

TS: I wish. We're about to head out for dinner

Me: Damn. Well tomorrow will be better when I can taste you

TS: You're killing me. Are you going to go down on me this time?

The few times we had been intimate, I hadn't had a chance to take him into my mouth. The first night, we were in a heat of passion that turned into hard fucking. The next time, Tyler was the one to drop to his knees and that led to my bedroom. The last couple of times, Tyler had pleaded for me to fuck him before I'd had the chance. Don't get me wrong, I loved to suck dick, but I couldn't deny Tyler when he begged like that.

Me: I would love nothing more

TS: Fuck. Is it tomorrow yet?

I snickered, a huge ass grin on my face and a hard dick in my pants.

Me: Almost

Adjusting myself, I went back to my computer and searched for flights to San Diego. I booked the earliest flight out of Boston with the return flight at the latest possible time. Before I could look up hotels, Jack texted me.

Got the hotel changed to your name. Here's the info

When I saw the pin of the hotel down the street from where the Ducks played, excitement coursed through me. I couldn't wait to be with Tyler again.

THE ANTICIPATION HAD ME TOSSING AND TURNING ALL NIGHT. I hadn't felt like a giddy teenage boy since I was one. Maybe it was the sneaking around that heightened everything, but I couldn't contain the happiness I felt as soon as the plane touched down in San Diego.

Me: Landed

TS: At baggage claim

We'd made a plan for Tyler to get a rideshare to the airport and wait for me so we wouldn't have to worry about his dads or anyone he knew seeing us. It wasn't as though they would know I was his professor, but we felt it would be better this way. The best part was, I wouldn't have to stop myself from wrapping him in my arms and kissing him.

Once I exited the plane, I hurried to baggage claim as fast as my feet would carry me. While it felt like it had been weeks or even months since I'd last seen Tyler, it had only been a few days. That didn't stop me from having the biggest smile on my face when I spotted him at the bottom of the escalators with a duffle and camera bag in hand. He grinned too and when I reached the bottom, my bags slid to the floor, and I threw my arms around his neck.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” he replied in the crook of my neck.

“Fancy meeting you here.”

Tyler snorted. “Yep.”

I pulled back, cupped his cheeks, and for the first time in public, placed my lips against his. Everything around us seemed to melt away as we deepened the kiss. It all felt right as we made out, as though his lips were made for me. The longer our mouths worked against each other, the harder it was to contain the excitement coursing through my entire body.

I reluctantly pulled back. “We need to get out of here. I got us an early check-in,” I advised.

“Lead the way.”

I grabbed his hand and headed toward the shuttle that took us to the rental car center. Once we got dropped off, I checked in for the car and then we were on our way to the hotel.

“Your dads were cool with you leaving?” I asked as I pulled onto the freeway.

“Told them I was going up to Anaheim for the Ducks game with some friends, just not with who, exactly.”

“Ah,” I replied. At least he didn’t have to lie to them. “And they know you’re not coming home tonight?”

“Yep.” He popped the P.

“Good.”

We fell into small talk on the two-hour drive until Tyler told me about going to see his mother. That turned into more than just a casual conversation.

“Remember how I mentioned my bio mom sucked?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well.” He blew out a breath. “She contacted my brother, and we ended up going to see her.”

“Really? How did that go?”

He shrugged briefly. “She didn’t seem all that thrilled that I was there, but still tried to act like she’s done nothing wrong and everything should be lovey-dovey with us three— or at least with my brother, Dylan.”

“You mentioned before that your relationship with her isn’t good, but you weren’t specific. What happened with her?” I probed.

“Growing up, she never put me and my brother first. She dated a lot of guys and then once she got with her last husband, it became worse. She turned into a homophobic bitch

when she found out my dad was dating a man. Or maybe she'd always been one, who knows? Anyway, she and Miguel, who was only her boyfriend at the time, tried to defy the custody order by keeping me and my brother in Texas."

"Does she know you're gay?"

"Well." He chuckled. "She does now. I told her right before my brother and I walked out of the restaurant."

My eyes widened. "Seriously?"

He lifted a shoulder. "It just sorta slipped out."

"How did she take it?"

"Not well. She had the audacity to blame my father's influence when I told her I had a boyfriend."

"Wait. You told her about me?"

"Just that I'm dating someone and happy."

"You're happy?" I grinned.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Yeah. I'm happy too." We smiled at each other until I quickly looked back at the road. "What's going to happen now between you two?"

He looked out the window at the hills outside his window. "Hopefully it sunk in that we never want to see her again."

I wasn't super close with my parents, given their baby was *The Hub*, but I still couldn't imagine never seeing them again. They were nothing but supportive of me, and to think Tyler hadn't had that from his biological mother was heartbreaking.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"It's okay." He turned back to look at me. "I have Jamie, and she's the only mother I need."

"Your stepdad's ex-wife, right?"

"Yeah, Chase. He played for the Rockies and moved to San Diego when he retired. He and my dad went to college together and then reconnected years later when my father became Chase's son's travel ball coach. It's a crazy story."

I was racking my brain for a former Rockies player named Chase and then ... “Wait. Chase Matthewson is your stepdad?”

“Yeah. You know who he is?”

“Do I know who he is? Jesus, Tyler. I grew up a Sox’s fan. Chase Matthewson was responsible for us not winning the World Series like eleven years ago. I was there that night covering the game for *The Hub*.”

“Wow, that’s cool.” I shot him a playful glare. “I mean, not cool your team lost, but cool you know who my dad is.”

“I think it’s safe to say a lot of people know who Chase Matthewson is.”

“Yeah, you’re right. From what I’ve been told, he holds a lot of awards or something.”

“I don’t doubt that. He was a wicked shortstop.”

“I’ve heard that. Unfortunately, I wasn’t into baseball back then and never watched him play. My dad was a fan and then I found out why.”

“Because he had a thing for him?”

“Which started after they fooled around in college.”

“Ah. Good old college experimenting.” I chuckled.

“Yeah, but look at them now.”

“Right.” Would that be me and Tyler? I knew I was falling head over heels for this guy, but would things progress further after he graduated college?

“So, if you know Chase, then you probably know of his friends Aron and Drew?”

Not only did I know of Aron Parker and Drew Rockland for many reasons—like their fight that turned into the media calling their love story one of ‘enemies to lovers’—I also knew they’d gotten married and had twin daughters. Their story had given me hope that Jonah would come out, since both Aron and Drew had continued to play after everyone knew they were dating.

“I do,” I confirmed.

“Cool. They’ve agreed to play in the charity softball game.”

“That’s awesome. I’m not gonna lie; I’m going to be starstruck when I see them. Is Chase playing too?”

“He is.”

And then it hit me. “Your dads will be at the softball game?”

“Yeah.” Tyler raised a brow.

“The same game I’ll be at?”

“Yeah?” he said again.

“I just ...”

“Don’t worry. If you happen to run into each other, I’ll introduce you as my professor, not my sexy boyfriend.”

“You think I’m sexy?” I smirked.

Tyler snorted. “Fuck yeah.”

I punched on the gas.

OUR HOTEL ROOM WAS READY ONCE WE ARRIVED IN ANAHEIM and we didn’t hesitate to go straight there.

“Are you hungry?” I asked as I opened the door to the room.

“Not for food,” he replied, his lips crashing down on mine.

My fingertips roamed over the curves of his body as if I could memorize every inch of him and, oh hell, did I want to.

We fumbled together like two madmen, clothes thrown every which way before I finally got my man naked.

I sunk to my knees.

I enjoyed giving head, but all the other times we'd been together; I wanted to be deep inside of him as fast as possible after he begged me to fuck him. But with Tyler's erection staring in my face, all I wanted to do was taste him like I'd promised.

"You look so hot on your knees," Tyler said, running his fingers through my hair.

My whole body shivered in response, meeting his eyes.

"Now, open that beautiful mouth of yours. I'm going to take it slow at first, but soon you're going to choke on my cock while my cum slides down your throat. Is that understood?"

My dick twitched. Usually, I was the one giving orders, but a bossy Tyler had me licking my lips and nodding. I opened my mouth, tongue wagging out as I caught the bit of pre-cum on his tip and lapped up his salty drops.

"Yeah, you like the taste of me, Professor?"

I nodded, stretching my mouth over his crown.

He didn't move, his entire body tensing as he let my tongue explore the ridges of his length. When he let out a long breath as I took him deeper, I knew he was already getting close.

I rolled my tongue over his shaft, bobbing my head. What I couldn't get in my mouth, I circled my fist around, jacking him while I sucked him off.

"Fuck, you take my dick so good," he murmured, his hips flexing.

I sucked harder, working my hand along his length.

"Shit. I'm going to come. Are you ready?" he gritted between his teeth, thrusting forward.

I hummed my response right before he unloaded into my throat. I barely had time to swallow before he pulled me by the hair and tangled our mouths together again.

He lapped up each bit of his saltiness on my tongue and then I was pushing him to the bed and grabbing a condom and lube from my bag.

WITH THE PRESS BADGES I HAD FROM *THE HUB*, TYLER AND I were able to get into the arena and then to where the photographers sat.

“Go ahead and set up your camera and start shooting the ice. This cutout”—I pointed to the hole in the glass—“is for your lens, but be careful because during play, the players or a puck can hit it. Everything moves fast in hockey.”

“Okay,” he replied and opened his camera bag.

The players weren’t warming up yet, but capturing the ice would let me and Tyler know if his white balance was set correctly. Once the players came out, he would get a little bit of practice with shooting before the fast-paced gameplay started.

“How did you end up covering this game anyway?” he asked.

“My hockey reporter’s wife had a baby yesterday and called me on the way to the hospital.” I snapped the lens onto my camera.

“Oh wow.”

“But I think it all worked out.” I winked.

“I’d say so.”

“Plus, my buddy Coop might get his 300th goal tonight and I don’t mind being here to witness it.”

“300? That’s amazing.”

“Yeah. Definitely a milestone, and he’s young too.”

“How young?”

“Twenty-seven I believe.”

“That’s young?” Tyler raised a brow.

“Well, I mean, he’s only been playing for about six seasons. Not including any playoff games each team plays about eighty-two games per season, so that’s fifty-plus goals a year. Not too shabby.”

“Ah. I gotta admit I don’t know anything about hockey.”

“But you were at the Bruins game.”

“Only because Fallon had an extra ticket. Sports aren’t really my thing.”

“Not even baseball?”

He chuckled. “Nope. I mean, I understand the game because of my dads and brothers, but I was more into music and academics growing up.”

“And now you’re dating a sports journalist?” I teased.

“Yeah, it seems like I can’t escape it no matter what I do.”

A few moments later, the teams came out onto the ice. It didn’t take long for Coop to spot me and he skated over to where we stood behind the glass.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” he stated.

“Last minute schedule change. Heard you might score your 300th goal?”

“Dude. Don’t say that. You’re going to jinx me.”

We both laughed, and I said, “Nah, man. I flew all the way here. You’re going to do it.”

“Hope so, or at least I hope I do it before the season ends since we’re not making the playoffs.”

“I feel it. You will get it tonight.”

“Thanks, man. Catch up after the season is over?”

“Sure thing.” Coop skated off, and I glanced beside me at Tyler. “Sorry, I didn’t introduce you.”

“No worries,” he replied.

“But ...” A thought came to me. “I could ask him to play in the softball game if you still need players. He’s local and might be staying in the area after the season.”

His eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Yeah, maybe even some of his buddies would want to join.”

“I won’t pass up any celebrities.”

“Okay. I’ll see if he will.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course.” I beamed.

I was learning I’d do anything for Tyler Statler.

Even fly across the country to be with him.

TYLER

THE LAST THIRTY-SIX HOURS WITH HAYDEN HAD BEEN perfect. I even enjoyed the hockey game, especially when his friend, Emmett Cooper, made his 300th goal.

Watching Hayden in his element, snapping photos at record speed, was impressive. Since finding out he worked at *The Hub*, I'd spent some time online looking at his work. He was an excellent photographer and getting to learn from him, especially during our after hours lectures, had me looking forward to when I could share my own stories through photojournalism. Of course, I'd hoped to cover bands and concerts, not sports teams.

Unfortunately, all good things came to an end, and the closer we got to my parents' house, the more I wanted to jump on the plane back to Massachusetts with him.

"I wish you didn't have to leave," I admitted as we drove along the coast.

He lifted my hand he was holding and kissed my knuckles. "Me either. Being away from you the last few days was harder than I expected."

The wistfulness in his voice echoed how I'd felt since I arrived in San Diego. If we were both struggling after such a short time, how would we ever be able to maintain a long-

distance relationship after graduation without feeling utterly miserable?

“Yeah, but I’ll be home in a few days.” I’d never referred to Massachusetts as home before, but it was beginning to feel that way since the man who was quickly working his way into my heart lived there.

“About that ... I don’t think I’ll be able to pick you up from the airport,” he advised as he turned onto my street. “With Jack out on paternity leave, me and my other sports photographer need to cover his games.”

Before I’d left for San Diego, he’d mentioned getting one of his coworkers to take the Celtics game on Saturday, but I understood he had work commitments he couldn’t get out of. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll find a ride.”

“Could you come over after the game? I know you’ll be tired and all, but I’d really like to see you when you get back.”

A smile spread across my face. “Call me when you’re done and I’ll come over.”

Before I was ready, I saw the house come into view and pointed to the sprawling beachfront property. The outdoor lights were on, making it stand out against the night sky. “That’s me.”

“This is where you grew up?” Hayden asked, driving slowly past my place so he could park out of view.

“We moved here when my dad and Chase decided to live together.”

“It’s beautiful. No wonder you want to move back home.”

“Uh ... yeah,” I sighed. “I still haven’t found an internship, so we’ll see.” The truth was, I hadn’t applied for that many yet. At first, I had chalked it up to being busy, but now I wondered if I was hesitating because I didn’t want to leave Hayden behind. Maybe I needed to widen my search to places on the East Coast as well.

We sat in silence for a few moments, and I wondered if he was having trouble saying goodbye like me. Finally, I spoke

up, “I guess I should let you go if you’re going to make your flight.” He still had another thirty-minute drive to the airport.

“Yeah. I’m really glad you could come with me last night.”

“Me too.”

I leaned over the console and pressed my lips to his. Our tongues moved together in perfect rhythm, and he kissed me so passionately, a shiver ran down my spine.

When we broke apart, he rested his forehead against mine. “I’ll see you Saturday.”

“Saturday,” I repeated and slid out of the car.

With one last goodbye, I shut the door behind me and made my way back to the house before walking inside.

“Tyler, is that you?” Dad called from somewhere in the back of the house.

I headed that way and found him sitting at the dining table with Chase and Jamie. “Hey, guys,” I greeted. “J-Mom, I didn’t know you were going to be here tonight.” Under any other circumstance, I would have hurried home to spend more time with her.

“Cammie left her phone at my place, so I brought it to her. Come sit down with us.”

“Let me go put my stuff away.” I lifted my bags. “And I’ll be right down.”

I ran upstairs and tossed my things into my room. When I joined them again, I gave Jamie a hug and took a seat next to her. “Did you guys move the table or something?” I asked when I noticed we were sitting closer to the window than usual.

“Your dads are being ridiculous.” Jamie chuckled. My dads each glared at her playfully before shifting their attention to the deck.

I glanced outside and saw a small group of kids, who all looked to be Cammie’s age, sitting around the fire pit. “What’s going on?”

“Cammie has a boyfriend,” Dad growled.

I took a closer look and noticed a lanky teen sitting beside my sister. “That kid?”

“Yep.” Chase crossed his arms over his chest. “And I don’t like the way he keeps looking at her.”

“The way he’s looking at her is probably the least of your worries since he’s got his hand on her leg,” I advised.

“What?” Chase’s eyes widened as he leaned closer to the window.

“Oh, let them be. I think it’s adorable,” Jamie commented with a hint of amusement in her voice. It seemed she enjoyed goading them.

“That’s because you weren’t a teenage boy once. We know exactly what he’s thinking,” my dad huffed.

“When did you two get to be so old and grumpy?” I teased.

“About thirty minutes ago, when Ryan showed up.” Jamie laughed.

“So, what’s the plan? Are the three of you going to sit here and watch them all night?”

“If we have to,” Chase muttered as he kept watch over the group.

“I was going to leave, but these two”—Jamie gestured to my dads—“got all protective and growly, so I thought I’d stay for Ryan’s sake.”

Movement from outside caught our attention, and we watched as Cammie headed in our direction. When she opened the door, we tried to act as though we hadn’t been watching her, but she didn’t buy it.

“I know what you guys are doing.”

“Yeah, you might want to remind loverboy of that fact and tell him to keep his hands to himself,” Chase grumbled.

“God, you’re so embarrassing.” Cammie stormed into the kitchen and grabbed the ingredients for s’mores. “Why don’t

you guys interrogate Tyler about his boyfriend instead of watching me with mine?”

“How’d you know I have a boyfriend?”

“Dylan said something to Jase when you guys came back from the breakfast from hell. I’m guessing since I haven’t heard you mention this mystery guy, that must mean you want to keep him a secret for some reason.” She smirked.

I loved my little sister, but at that moment, I was annoyed by how perceptive she was and her willingness to throw me under the bus.

“You’re dating someone?” Jamie asked excitedly.

“Have fun.” Cammie winked at me and ran back outside.

“Yeah. I told Dad about him,” I stated.

My dad laughed. “That’s not exactly true. You just said you were seeing someone. You didn’t tell me anything about him.”

He had me there. “Tell you what, if I’m still dating him at graduation, I’ll introduce you,” I offered, knowing if I had my way, Hayden and I would most definitely still be together then.

“Deal.” He grinned.

THE REST OF THE WEEK DRAGGED ON, AND WHILE I ENJOYED the time with my family, I was more than ready to get back to school and, more importantly, back to Hayden.

Dad pulled up to the passenger drop zone, and both he and Chase got out of the car so we could say our goodbyes.

“It was good having you home,” Chase said as he hugged me. “We’ll see you in a month for the softball game.”

“I can’t wait. Thanks again for all your help getting your friends on board.”

“Anything for you.” He slapped my back a couple of times and then pulled away.

My dad snagged my suitcase from the back and wheeled it over to me before enveloping me in his arms. “Have a safe flight home. Love you.”

“I love you too, Dad. I’ll see you soon.”

I grabbed the handle on my suitcase and made my way into the terminal. After checking in my bag and going through security, I looked for a place to get some coffee since it was early and I desperately needed some caffeine.

While waiting at my gate, I pulled out my phone and texted Hayden:

At the airport. Should be back in town around 5. Can’t wait to see you tonight

HF: Me either. The game starts at 4, so I should be home by 7:30

During our phone call the night before, we’d decided I’d order a ride to his house to avoid anyone at the frat seeing me get into his car.

Me: I’ll be there at 8. Give you a little time to prepare for me 😊

HF: Oh, I’ll be ready

AS WAS USUALLY THE CASE WHEN I WAS EXCITED ABOUT something, time seemed to stretch into eternity. First, our plane had to wait for a gate to be available after we landed, then it took forever to get my luggage from baggage claim. By the time I was in my rideshare, my body was buzzing with anticipation.

When my ride dropped me off at the fraternity house, I headed inside to unpack and shower since I still had an hour before I needed to leave to go to Hayden’s place. Several of

my frat brothers were home, and I called out greetings as I made my way to my room.

“Hey. I didn’t expect to see you tonight,” Fallon said as he stepped into the hallway, and then he lowered his voice. “I figured you would have gone straight over to you-know-who’s house after a week away.”

I nudged my head toward my room, indicating he should follow me. When we stepped inside, I closed the door so we could talk freely. “He’s covering a game right now. I’m going over there in a little bit.”

“So, are things getting serious between you two?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I think so. He actually came out to California to see me.”

“Really?”

“Well, it was for work, but he asked me to stay the night with him while he was there.” It was nice to have someone I could share this type of stuff with because keeping it to myself was becoming more difficult as time went on. I wanted nothing more than to tell the world how happy I was. “It was the best part of the trip.”

“Sounds like someone might be falling for their professor.”

I was pretty sure I already had.

AT EXACTLY EIGHT O’CLOCK, I KNOCKED ON HAYDEN’S DOOR, and he flung it open, wearing only a towel around his waist.

“Get your ass in here,” he said, pulling me inside.

“Only my ass gets an invitation?” I teased.

He pushed me against the wall. “Shut up and kiss me.”

I wrapped my hands around his neck and pulled him close, our mouths crashing together.

“If this is the welcome I get after a few days apart, I may have to go away more often.”

“Don’t you dare,” he growled, trailing his lips down my neck. “The last four days were torture. I missed you.”

I moaned as he sucked the sensitive skin of my throat. “How much?”

He grabbed my hand and placed it on the growing bulge behind the towel. “Does this answer your question?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said as I ripped off my shirt and then shucked out of my pants.

His lips were back on mine, his towel and my boxers long gone as we fumbled our way to the bedroom, our hands and mouths exploring each other.

I fell back on his bed and he followed, laying right beside me, his hand tugged on my dick in long strokes as his tongue attacked mine.

Before Hayden, I didn’t think it was possible to miss someone so much. Or that every time I was with him would feel as exciting as the first time. But I couldn’t focus too hard on my thoughts because after just a few powerful pulls on my cock, I could already feel my balls tighten. I put my hand over his, breaking our kiss. “You’re going to have to stop that unless you want me to come from just your hand.”

He grinned. “You want me to fill you while I jack you off instead?”

“Yes, please,” I whispered.

A low growl emitted from deep in his throat before he drew me in for another scorching kiss that still had my lips on fire as he pulled away.

A bottle of lube and a condom were already waiting on his nightstand, and he got himself sheathed and primed as I moved into position, ready for him to take me.

He kneeled between my thighs and circled my ass with his finger. When I relaxed, he pushed two digits inside of me, curling at just the right angle that I saw stars.

“Fuck, you’re good with your hands.”

“As good as I am with my tongue?” he asked, still thrusting as he gave me that wicked grin.

“I think I might need a reminder,” I taunted, knowing damn well how talented he was with his mouth.

He leaned forward, and my eyes closed as he ran his tongue from the base of my dick all the way to the tip before trailing it back down along my crack.

“Shit,” I gasped as he removed his fingers and flicked his tongue around my rim.

He continued to tease my ass as I squirmed on the bed, not sure if I wanted more or needed him to stop before I blew my load.

“Hayden, I need you in me now,” I pleaded.

“As you wish,” he murmured and crawled over me. He didn’t waste any time, gripping my hip with one hand and fisting my shaft with the other as he pounded into me.

Neither of us wanted to go slow while we chased the high of our orgasms.

The high of each other.

“Fuck you feel good. You’re gonna make me come so quick, but I need to watch you first. Let go for me,” he commanded, causing my swollen cock to jolt.

I matched my rhythm with his, pushing my ass up to meet his every move. Each thrust was like heaven and I didn’t want it to stop, but I felt my climax build deep inside of me.

Moaning his name, I released one long breath before hot spurts of my spend squirted between us.

Hayden panted and slammed into me a few more times before he stilled. Even with the barrier I could feel the heat of him filling the condom. He rolled off of me and went to clean up before coming back to bed. I knew it wouldn’t be long before either of us was ready for round two, but I was also happy to lay wrapped in his arms.

HAYDEN

WHEN I HAD GONE TO THE HOCKEY GAME WITH TYLER IN Anaheim, I didn't think about Jonah. I had felt no added sorrow about going to the game as I had the time before. Maybe it was because I was distracted by Tyler, or maybe I was finally accepting that Jonah was gone and I was allowed to be happy again. Because I was happy. Tyler made me feel things I hadn't felt in such a long time, and while it used to scare me, now it excited me.

"I can't believe you have me watching hockey on TV."

I glanced next to me on the couch to see Tyler grinning. "You've been to hockey games before."

"I know, but I've never watched it on TV."

"What's wrong with watching it on TV?"

"Nothing." He shook his head. "My dads are going to love you."

I blinked at his affirmation and whispered, "What?"

"They love sports. Baseball may reign supreme in the Statler-Matthewson household, but they love all sports."

"Yeah, but do you know what you just said?"

His brow furrowed. "That they'll love you?"

"Yeah," I confirmed.

“Oh.” He grimaced.

“It’s not that I don’t want to meet them.” I reached over and grabbed his hand. “Just surprised you said that.”

“They’ve only met the guy I dated in high school.”

“Really?”

Tyler nodded. “They never got the chance to meet the other two before we broke up.”

“I get that.” We turned our attention back to the game, but then I said, “You know I would want to meet them under different circumstances, right?” I didn’t need to elaborate. We knew when they came for the softball game that he wasn’t going to introduce me as his boyfriend—or at all.

“Yeah, but maybe after graduation you can come to dinner with us while they’re in town,” he suggested.

“You want them to know about me that fast?”

“You won’t be my professor anymore.”

I wouldn’t be his professor after he turned in his final portfolio and I issued his grade, either. So, was there harm in meeting them at graduation?

“Okay. Tell them you’re bringing your boyfriend to dinner then.”

It wouldn’t be the first time I met a boyfriend’s parents, but it had been a while. I never got to meet Jonah’s family before he died, and I didn’t know how to introduce myself at his funeral, so meeting Tyler’s parents wasn’t something I was recently familiar with. What if they didn’t like me because of our age difference? What if they didn’t like me because they thought I wasn’t good enough for their son? What if they didn’t like me because I had been his professor? His father was a teacher after all, and I would think he would frown upon a student/teacher relationship, but they would have to meet me eventually, right? Could we omit some of the details and just tell them we met at Chrome, and let that be that?

We returned to watching Coop’s last game of the season. He scored his 304th goal, and the Bruins won, but it didn’t

matter because they didn't make the playoffs. The next day, I sent Coop a text asking to meet for a drink.

COOP WANTED TO MEET AT THE SAME SPEAKEASY-INSPIRED eatery we'd had drinks at before. I got the impression it was his favorite place to hang out, given the bar was secluded in the back, giving high-profile patrons a sense of privacy.

When I made it to the back where Coop was waiting alone, I smiled and gave a brief wave before walking to his table in the corner. He stood, and we shared a bro hug.

"Good to see you," he said.

"You too. Can I get you another?" I pointed at his half-empty beer.

"Yeah, but just add ours to my tab." He slid back into his seat.

"You know you don't need to do that." I felt as though we'd had the same conversation the time before when I'd met him for drinks.

"It's not a problem. Just tell the bartender I said it was cool."

"All right." I went to the bar and got us each a pint of beer before returning to his table. "Sorry about the playoffs."

"Always next season, right?" He grabbed the amber lager from me.

"We can hope." I took a sip of the beer. "What are your plans for the off-season?"

"Just relaxing. Maybe go somewhere tropical."

"Tropical is always nice."

"Yeah. Do you have plans for the summer?"

"My friend Charlotte is getting married in June and then I don't know." It was on the tip of my tongue to mention Tyler

and how I hoped to spend time with him, but I didn't because I wasn't sure if Tyler was going back to California right away after graduation or not. I liked to assume he wasn't, but if he didn't have the fraternity house to live in, where would he stay? With me? Surprisingly, the thought didn't scare me.

“That’s cool.”

“Speaking of plans, do you have any next Sunday?”

He arched a brow. “Next Sunday?”

“Do you like softball?”

Coop blinked. “What?”

“I know you’re good with a stick, but what about a bat?”

“What are you talking about?”

I chuckled. “How would you feel about playing in a celebrity softball game?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, a fraternity at the college I teach at is hosting one. It’s benefiting LGBTQ+ youth programs, and I figured since ___”

“LGBTQ+?” He held up his hands. “Hayden ...”

“What?”

“I can’t play in an LGBTQ+ softball game.”

I balked. “Why not?”

“You know why.” He gave me a stern look.

I lowered my voice and said, “Just because you play in one doesn’t mean people will know.”

“Are only gay guys playing?” he asked in a whisper.

“I don’t think so.” I shook my head, but I wasn’t sure if that was true. Tyler had said his stepdad, Chase, and his friends Aron and Drew were all game, but when I mentioned asking Coop, Tyler didn’t ask if he was gay. So, did Tyler assume Coop was, or was it open to anyone?

“But what if it is?”

“Hold on.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and texted Tyler.

Are only members of the LGBTQ+ community playing in the softball game?

He replied right away:

No why?

Me: Just wondering. I'm asking Coop now

TS: Is he going to do it?

Me: I'll let you know

I glanced back up at Coop. “It’s not only LGBTQ+ players.”

He thought for a moment. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, and trust me; I wouldn’t do that to you.” I didn’t need to elaborate on what *that* was.

“Maybe I should ask some of my teammates.”

“I’m sure the fraternity would love that.” I’d mentioned it to Tyler before, but I was going to let Coop think it was his idea if it put his mind at ease to have straight guys he knew playing with him.

He pulled out his phone and typed something on the screen. “I just texted a few.”

“Cool, thanks.” I took a sip of beer. “Are you doing okay with ... everything?”

He tilted his head to the side. “You mean what I shared last time we were here?”

“Yeah.”

“No progress.”

“Do you want there to be some?”

“Can’t until I retire.”

“When is that?” I wondered.

“I have two more seasons on my contract.”

“And then you want to retire?”

“I’m not sure.” He spun the fake candle on the table. “Just ... tired.”

“Tired of playing?”

“Tired of ...” He paused again. After a few moments he admitted, “Tired of being lonely.”

“If you want, you can go to the club with me. I met Jonah at one.”

“But what if I hook up with someone who tells?”

“It’s not ideal, but Jonah had me sign an NDA. Just do that.”

“Really?”

“Yes, plus I think guys will understand because not everyone is out, you know?”

“Right, but I don’t know. Seems too risky. Someone might take a picture of me.”

“There’s always dating apps,” I teased.

“Dating apps?”

“Yep. Some people don’t even use their face. You can hook up with someone without names and shit.”

“For real?”

It was shocking Coop didn’t already know these things. Had he never hooked up with someone? Ever? I was tempted to ask, but instead, I replied, “Yeah. You can even do the NDA thing once you meet them in person, in case they recognize you.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Using dating apps?”

I shook my head. “No. I have a boyfriend.”

“Oh, cool. I hadn’t necessarily planned on telling Coop I was dating someone, but then again, it had been over three

years since Jonah passed away. Maybe if Coop and I had stayed in touch more throughout the years it would have shocked him, but he didn't seem surprised, probably because he didn't know I had harbored the guilt of Jonah's car accident for so long.

His phone buzzed on the table. "Butcher and Sexton are in for the softball game."

"Awesome." I picked up my phone and texted Tyler again.

Got you 3 hockey players for the game

TS: You're the best! I owe you.

Me: I'm sure I can think of a way for you to repay me 😊

TYLER

WAKING UP NEXT TO HAYDEN WAS EASILY ONE OF MY favorite things. Since returning from San Diego a month ago, we'd tried to spend as much time together as we could, which resulted in me staying at his place a few nights a week. We were growing closer, and every day that passed, I fell a little harder for him.

I snuggled next to my man, trying to soak up every possible second with him before we had to get up. "I wish I could stay here all day."

He trailed his fingers up and down my arm. "Me too. What time are you meeting your parents?"

"They got an early check-in at their hotel, and I'm supposed to meet them for lunch at noon."

"And after that?"

"They mentioned walking around the city for a bit before I have to get back to the house to finish some stuff for tomorrow's game."

"I'm guessing that means you won't be able to spend the night here?"

I shook my head. "Probably not. Fallon expects the entire frat to be there, and we'll likely be working until pretty late."

“Guess we better make good use of the time we have this morning then,” Hayden said right before he pushed me onto my back and covered my mouth with his.

AFTER SPENDING A COUPLE OF HOURS WITH MY DADS DOING the typical tourist stuff, I’d headed back to the Sigma house. Around eight, we ordered pizza for everyone and took a short break, but once we were done eating, everyone continued to work. We’d been fortunate to receive donations from several companies and organizations, so a group of guys sat around the table in the chapter room, stuffing swag bags for the players and VIPs while others organized dozens of raffle baskets.

Around midnight, I finally finished the schedule for the meet and greet session, where all the players would take pictures and sign autographs for those who bought special admission tickets. Thanks to Hayden, I’d gotten in contact with Emmett Cooper earlier in the week, and he, along with his two teammates, agreed to take part in the pregame festivities as well.

As I was wrapping up, I saw Preston and Ford talking in the hallway. Preston and I would work together closely during the event, and I wanted to chat with him before we called it a night. However, I wasn’t going to approach him until he finished his conversation. Ever since Ford’s confession that he missed me and wanted us to give our relationship another chance, I’d tried to avoid him as much as possible. The last time we talked was on the drive up to the ski resort, but that didn’t mean I didn’t notice the occasional longing glances he aimed in my direction whenever our paths crossed. It made me uncomfortable, but I didn’t want to hurt him either, so ignoring him was the best course of action.

As I continued waiting, Fallon sat beside me and asked, “You all set for tomorrow?”

I nodded. “I think so. I’m going to head over to the field early in the morning to make sure the maintenance crew has everything set up for the meet and greet. Once that’s done, we should be good to go.”

“You’ve done a great job with everything, man. I doubt the game would have been sold-out if you didn’t get all those celebrities to agree to play.”

Fallon’s compliment meant a lot to me. I’d worked my ass off to make the event a success since it would help fund programs for youth who might be struggling with their sexuality and identity, and I couldn’t be happier with how it was coming together.

“Thanks. I can’t wait to see how much money we’ve raised.”

I’d been distracted by my conversation with Fallon, so when he muttered, “Incoming,” I had no idea what he was talking about. I looked up just in time to see Preston and Ford heading our way.

Preston sat in the open chair beside me. “Hey, Tyler. Good news. Ford offered to help us during the meet and greet tomorrow. I know you wanted an additional person there to get the players rotated through for their sessions, so now we’re set.”

I glanced at Ford, who grinned at me. I couldn’t help but wonder if his offer to help was sincere, or if he was doing it to force me to stop ignoring him, knowing I couldn’t turn him down without raising suspicion among our frat brothers.

“That’s great. We could use an extra set of hands when the gates open,” I responded and then turned my attention back to Preston. “I emailed you the final schedule. I’m going to order a rideshare to head over to the stadium in the morning to make sure everything is ready. Did you still want to go with me?”

“I can drive you,” Ford offered before Preston could answer.

Fallon turned to me and lifted an eyebrow. I was stuck, and we both knew it.

“Uh ... there’s not much that needs to be done, and it’s going to be early.” Knowing Ford wasn’t a morning person, I hoped he’d change his mind.

“That’s fine. I’m happy to do it.”

Preston stood and clapped him on the shoulder, oblivious to my discomfort. “Works for me. Thanks.”

“All right, I want to head over at eight,” I said.

“I’ll be ready,” Ford replied and followed Preston to chat with another group of brothers.

“What was that about?” Fallon whispered. “A couple of months ago, he asked me to put him on another committee so he wouldn’t have to work with you.”

I shrugged. “Who knows.”

I hadn’t told Fallon about Ford wanting to get back together, and it wasn’t the time with so many people around. Besides, it didn’t matter what Ford wanted. I was happy with Hayden, and nothing my ex could do would change that.

WE ARRIVED AT LIBERTY FIELD—HOME OF THE HAWKINS U softball team—just as the maintenance crew set up the last tables where the players would sign autographs. Thankfully, since Preston had caught a ride with us, Ford hadn’t been able to trap me into a conversation on the way over.

“Hi, Tyler,” Tim, the head groundskeeper, said as he shook my hand. “Do you need any more tables out here?”

I looked around the grassy area behind the center field wall where we stood. “I think we’re good. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. The band’s crew is already here to set up, so I’m going to check in with them. If you need anything, you’ve got my number; just shoot me a text.”

Flirting with Fire, the band I’d been able to secure because of Aron Parker and his connection to the lead guitarist’s

husband, was going to perform a quick set after the meet and greet and then they would kick off the game with the National Anthem.

“Will do.”

I spent the next hour going over my checklist to make sure I hadn't missed anything. Once I was done with my tasks, I pulled out my phone to text Hayden:

Good morning. Are you on your way?

HF: Just got in my car. Do you need anything before I get there?

Me: Nope. Just need you 😊

HF: It's going to be hard keeping my hands off of you all day

Me: You can have your way with me tonight

HF: Can't wait

With a smile on my face, I tucked my phone away only to look up and see Ford watching me with a frown on his.

HAYDEN TEXTED ME WHEN HE ARRIVED, AND I TOLD HIM where to find me, knowing he wouldn't have a problem getting inside with his school ID.

“Good morning,” he said, keeping a respectful distance between us.

“Hi, Professor Foster. We appreciate you covering the game today,” I replied in case anyone overheard our interaction.

While we were used to pretending every Monday in class that we had a strictly platonic teacher-student relationship, it didn't make things any easier. I hated the fact I couldn't kiss him hello or hold his hand.

A little more than a month and then we could.

“So where can I store my stuff?” He lifted his camera bag and tripod.

“In there should be fine.” I gestured to the dugout behind me.

My phone pinged with another incoming message, this one from my father letting me know they’d arrived.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Hayden. “My parents are here.”

He nodded, and I rushed over to the gate to meet my dads, who were followed by Aron Parker and Drew Rockland.

“Hey, son. How’s it going?” my dad asked as he hugged me.

“It’s a little crazy, but I think we’re ready.”

Chase wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “We’re so proud of you. Today is going to be awesome.”

“I just got a text from Vaughn,” Aron advised me as he gave me a fist bump. “He and the band are almost here, and Slate’s with them.”

Slate Rodgers and Aron had played together for the San Francisco Giants, and I definitely owed Aron and Drew for getting them to participate in the event.

“Thanks again for getting me in contact with them. I couldn’t have done this without all of you.”

“Anything for a good cause,” Drew replied, pulling me in for a bro hug.

Since people were starting to arrive, I looked for someone who could monitor the gate and welcome the players. Ford was the only one who didn’t look busy, so I called him over.

“Hey, the players are going to start showing up soon. Could you hang out here and let them in?”

He eyed the group I was standing with, looking a bit starstruck and nodded. “Sure.”

“Thanks. Here’s a list with all the names. Just tell them to head over there.” I pointed toward the tables near the dugout.

When I had first talked to Aron and Drew about the game, I’d asked them if they’d like to be captains of opposing teams. I thought it was fitting since their relationship had started when they were opponents who’d famously gotten into a fight during a game before being traded to the same team and eventually falling in love. They were good sports about it and thought it would be fun.

As we started to cross the field, Fallon jogged over. “Hi, Mr. Statler.” He shook my dad’s hand before offering his hand to Chase. “Mr. Matthewson, it’s good to see you again. Thanks for coming.”

“Happy to be here,” my father responded.

“Fallon is the Sigma president,” I explained to Aron and Drew who each introduced themselves to my friend.

I led everyone to the dugout on the first base side where Aron’s team would be. He set down his gear and then we all headed over to the other side so Chase and Drew could do the same. When we reached the other dugout, Hayden stepped out, looking at something on his camera, and almost ran into Fallon.

“Hey, Professor Foster,” Fallon greeted before giving me a small questioning look. I’m sure he was curious how this interaction would play out.

Hayden’s head snapped up and I could tell by the way his eyes widened, he knew who we were standing with. Not only would he probably recognize Chase, Aron and Drew, but other than our different color eyes, I was the spitting image of my father.

“Good morning, Mr. Donnelley.” He nodded at me. “Mr. Statler. I was just going to take a few test shots before getting started.”

Hayden and I had already agreed that the game wasn’t the appropriate place for him to meet my parents and we’d planned to avoid introductions, even as my professor, if we

could help it. When my dads eventually learned about us, I wanted to be able to ease into the conversation about him having been my teacher because I didn't want them to view our relationship negatively. Now, when I introduced him as my boyfriend after graduation, they'd know right away and I worried how they'd react. Still, I couldn't stand here and not say anything.

"Professor Foster teaches my photojournalism class, but he also works for a local news outlet and has agreed to cover the game for us today." I faced Hayden. "These are my dads, Gage Statler and Chase Matthewson."

My dad stuck his hand out to shake Hayden's. "Nice to meet you. It's not every day we get to meet one of Tyler's professors."

"Likewise," Hayden replied before shaking Chase's hand as well.

I introduced Aron and Drew next.

"Gotta say, I was excited when I saw all of your names on the roster for today since I've been a fan for years," Hayden said "Although I can't say I enjoyed it much when the Rockies beat the Red Sox in the World Series." He directed the last part to Chase and Drew who had both been a part of that team.

"Best series of my career, but I get it," Drew said playfully.

"It's always fun to meet a fan, even if you root for the wrong team," Aron teased.

The seven of us chatted for a minute, and then I watched Flirting with Fire enter the stadium.

"I'm going to go say hi to Slate and Vaughn," Aron stated. "Want me to introduce you to the band?"

I nodded and our group followed Aron to where the guys were gathering behind home plate. Hayden went off to the side and started snapping pictures. Aron made the introductions, and it took a second for me to speak. I'd been looking forward to meeting Flirting with Fire for months since I was a huge fan of theirs. "Thank you for coming. It means a lot to all of us that you took the time to be here."

“When we heard what you were raising money for, we couldn’t say no,” Vaughn stated, and his husband Slate beamed at him.

“I love your music, so I’m excited to watch you live.”

“Tyler performed some covers of your songs with his band in high school,” Chase added. “He plays the guitar like his father.”

My cheeks flushed. “That was years ago.”

“Really?” James, their lead singer, asked. “Do you still play?”

I shook my head. “Not anymore, but I’m finishing my degree soon and will pursue a career in music journalism after graduation.”

“That’s cool, man. Maybe one day you could write about us,” Stix, who played drums, said.

“Maybe.” I smiled. That would be a dream come true. “For now, we should let you guys get ready. If you need anything, please let me know.”

It didn’t take long for the field to fill with players, and once Ford told me everyone had checked in, I grabbed the microphone Tim had brought over and started my announcement.

“Good morning, everyone,” I called out to get everybody’s attention. “On behalf of Sigma Epsilon, I want to thank you all for being a part of this event. A lot of local LGBTQ+ youth programs are going to benefit from the money we raise today, and we are grateful for your support.” I paused as everyone cheered. “We’re going to open the gates in about fifteen minutes for the meet and greet. Have a great game and I hope you all win.”

We had multiple lines roped off and had limited the number of tickets for this portion, but I was still concerned about it all running smoothly. After going to the tables and completing one last check that everything was ready, I noticed Emmett Cooper headed in my direction. Since I’d talked to

him over the phone, I thought it would be a good idea for me to introduce myself.

“Emmett Cooper?”

He smiled. “That’s me.”

“I’m Tyler Statler.” I shook his hand. “We talked on the phone. I just wanted to thank you again for joining us last minute.”

“Of course, and call me Coop,” he replied, and then introduced me to his teammates. “Butcher, Sexton, Tyler is one of the organizers of the game.”

“Nice to meet you both,” I said, shaking their hands as well. “Just so you know, this event sold out as soon as we announced you all would be part of it.”

That was true. Our sales had done well, but after we posted on social media that a couple of Bruins players would be participating, the last of the tickets had been scooped up in less than an hour.

“Really? That’s awesome.” Coop paused and gave me a questioning look. “Have we met before?”

Shit. He probably recognized me from the game in Anaheim. I didn’t think Hayden had told him we were in a relationship, and I wasn’t going to say anything.

“I get that a lot. I must have one of those familiar faces.”

Thankfully, Fallon announced the gates were opening, bringing an end to my conversation with Coop and his teammates.

LAYING IN HAYDEN’S BED, I COULD HARDLY KEEP MY EYES open. Everything had gone off without a hitch, and at the end of the day, we had raised over \$50,000.

Since I had to stay until the very end, I promised to meet my parents for breakfast the following morning and then

arranged for Hayden to pick me up on the other side of campus so I could go home with him.

“You did good today.” Hayden slid into bed and grabbed my hip, pulling me closer.

“Yeah, but now I’m exhausted. Looks like you won’t be getting lucky tonight.”

He chuckled. “Having you here with me is all I need.”

“Look at you being all sweet,” I teased.

“Don’t get used to it. I plan on having my way with you in the morning.”

I started drifting off but then remembered a conversation from earlier in the day. “I think Coop recognized me from the game in Anaheim.”

He ran his fingers through my hair. “Why do you think that?”

“When I talked to him, he asked if we had met before.”

“What’d you say?”

“I brushed it off like I didn’t know what he was talking about. I hope that was okay.”

He let out a breath. “It’s fine. I didn’t even think about that since I hadn’t introduced you guys at the game, but you don’t need to worry. When I tell him about you, I think he’ll be cool with everything.”

Hearing him talk about the future when he would be free to talk about our relationship made me smile. I leaned forward and placed a kiss over his heart, knowing he resided in mine.

“Sleep, baby,” he whispered.

And within seconds, I was out.

HAYDEN

A FEW DAYS LATER, I SQUINTED AGAINST THE BRIGHT FRIDAY morning sunlight as my eyes fluttered open. Apparently, I'd forgotten to close the curtains the night before. But as it happened many nights when Tyler came over, I had been a bit distracted by him, his mouth, and other things.

Turning over, I saw him lying on his stomach, the sheet pooling around his trim waist and exposing his bare back. It was a moment I wanted to remember forever, so I slowly slid out of bed, slipped on my boxers, and went to my office for my camera.

When I returned, he was in the same position, his arms crossed and his head resting on them. He looked peaceful as he slept, and after changing the ISO on my camera, I clicked the shutter and moved around to capture his sexy form from different angles.

“What are you doing?” he grumbled.

I glanced away from the optical viewfinder to see he had opened his eyes. I had been so focused on his body that I hadn't realized he was looking at me. Without responding, I took a few more pictures, but this time focusing on his face. Finally, I replied, “What I do best.”

He flipped onto his back, one arm staying behind his head and the sheet slipping further down. It caused his left hip and

abs to be exposed, and my mouth watered.

“Is this better?” He bit his bottom lip.

I groaned, my dick starting to harden as I rapidly clicked the shutter. “You have no idea what you do to me, do you?”

“What’s that?”

I pulled the camera away from my face again. Playfully I said, “Do you think I just give anyone free sessions?”

“Aw. It sounds like you love me,” he replied in a teasing voice.

Our eyes locked and my first reaction was to joke back, but as we stared at each other, I knew I loved Tyler Statler. I had no idea when I had fallen, but I had, and I wasn’t going to deny it.

“I do,” I whispered.

Tyler’s mouth went slack and his eyes widened slightly. “You do?”

I swallowed, my heart racing. “Yeah.”

He grinned as he rose onto his knees, the bedsheet no longer covering any part of his body. I stepped forward and placed my camera on the nightstand. He reached out for my hand. Standing in front of him, I looked up at his face.

“I love you too,” he confessed and attacked my mouth.

This time, even though our kisses were frenzied, there wasn’t that hurried rush to fuck. There was a new passion between us, as if we could say those same three words over and over again through making out. I could spend forever kissing him.

Forever.

Something I hadn’t thought about in a long time.

I loved Tyler. Loved everything about him, and my heart, which had been broken for several years, was finally mended.

His kisses continued roaming down my chest and to my abs.

And lower.

I didn't object as he slid my boxers down my hips and then nudged me to lie on my back on the bed. He straddled me and moved down until he wrapped his mouth around my hard dick and swirled his tongue around my tip.

I grabbed a pillow and placed it behind my head so I could look down the length of my naked body to watch him bob up and down on my shaft. We locked eyes, and with each movement, it felt as though there was a deeper connection between us.

Our unspoken words heightened the pleasure for me and, with each swirl of his tongue and sucking of his mouth, I was getting closer and closer to erupting.

"I'm going to blow if you keep going like that," I groaned, pushing my hips to chase the rush I was feeling.

He popped off my dick. "Would you rather come inside me?"

"Absolutely."

He sat up, grabbed the lube off the nightstand, and handed me a condom. I started to sit up, but he stopped me with a shake of his head. I arched a brow and watched as he straddled my hips and opened the bottle of lube.

"I want to be on top."

I didn't object as I rolled the latex on my aching shaft. He squirted lubricant onto his fingers and then reached back to coat his rectum.

"Fuck," I breathed as I imagined his fingers going into his ass.

"What?" He grinned. "You want to see me fuck myself?"

I watched his arm move as he continued to prep his hole. "Yes, but I also want you to ride me." Grabbing the bottle, I poured the lube on my cock and slathered it all over.

"Oh, sexy. I'm going to ride you so hard." Tyler moved until he was above my length, his own erection bobbing as it

darted out toward me. I licked my lips, wanting to taste him, but instead, I held the base of my rock-hard shaft and he sank slowly onto me, our eyes never leaving each other.

He started slow as he moved up and down my cock, and I reached between us for his dick, pumping him to match his tempo. There was no more talking as we let our bodies and moans convey how we were feeling. They say your eyes are the windows to your soul, and as I looked into Tyler's baby blues, I knew our love needed no words. Everything was mirrored in the way we looked at each other and it made my heart happy. We were living a secret, but soon, we could be us and not have to worry about jeopardizing my job or his education. I could tell everyone that I fell in love with my student and I wouldn't change anything.

We continued gazing at each other as our pace picked up. My hips thrust upward into him as he rocked his pelvis, and it didn't take long for both of us to explode, his cum shooting out in long milky ropes all over my stomach, and mine into the latex deep inside of him.

Leaning forward, he captured my lips with his and then said against my mouth, "I love you. So fucking much."

"I love you too, baby."

WE STAYED IN BED THE REST OF THE DAY, ONLY GETTING UP TO grab food. It felt as though we were in our own little bubble, where the outside world ceased to exist. While I enjoyed being alone with Tyler, it reminded me of how Jonah and I had stayed locked in my house too. Even though Tyler would only be my student for another month or so, I didn't want to wait any longer before I could be out in public with him. Jonah had always been afraid someone would recognize him if we went out; I didn't want that with Tyler.

"I want to take you on a date," I admitted.

Tyler looked up from where he lay on my chest. "Really?"

“Yeah. Dinner, a movie, whatever. I just want to take you out and hold your hand and kiss you and not care if people see us.”

“I want that too.”

“Then let’s not wait until after graduation.”

He lifted onto his elbow. “You’re willing to risk it now?”

I sat up. “I don’t know, but maybe we can go to a restaurant in the city and I can get us a table in the back that’s away from people.”

“Okay. When?”

I thought for a moment and then responded, “I have a game tomorrow, but what about Sunday?”

He rose and leaned against my headboard. “All right. We can do that.”

“Yeah?” I grinned.

“You’re buying, right?” He winked.

I chuckled. “Of course, I invited you.”

“Ah, so you want me to put out?” He couldn’t say that with a straight face.

My chuckle turned into a belly laugh. “Yeah, you better.”

“Depends on how good this meal will be.”

“I thought if I bought you dessert, it was a done deal?”

“I thought I was supposed to be the dessert?”

“Oh, you will be.”

I leaned forward and captured his lips. I meant for it to be quick, but I couldn’t resist as my tongue slipped in further. Within seconds, we were rolling in the sheets again.

MY EYES GREW HEAVY, AND BEFORE I KNEW IT, EVERYTHING around me became distorted. I stood along the side of a

desolate road, a feeling of unease washing over me, and a sense of dread weighing me down. Where was I? What was I doing on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere?

Screeching tires pierced the air, and I turned to see the headlights of an approaching car casting an eerie glow as the vehicle sliced through the darkness. I recognized Jonah's car as it hurtled down the road at a reckless speed. My pulse raced. Jonah? *Slow down!* I wanted to scream, but my breath caught in my throat as I watched the scene unfold before my eyes, every moment drawn out in agonizing slow motion.

The car skidded and spun out of control. Panic gripped my heart, squeezing it tight, as I realized the impending disaster that loomed before me.

In an instant, the car collided with a tree, and chaos erupted.

Shards of glass and twisted metal flew through the air, the impact echoing through the night sky like a sharp scream. Time seemed to stand still as the car crumpled, folding in on itself with a sickening crunch.

Desperation surged through me, overriding any instinct for self-preservation. I rushed toward the wreckage, but my movements were hindered by an invisible force. My heart pounded in my chest as I reached the mangled remains of the vehicle. With trembling hands, I fought to pry open the crushed door, fueled by a mix of fear and anguish.

Finally, the door gave way, and my eyes widened in horror. Inside, I saw Tyler, not Jonah. He was bloodied and unconscious, his body slumped against the contorted steering wheel. Tears welled in my eyes as I cradled his head in my trembling hands, desperately searching for any sign of life.

"Tyler, wake up!" I pleaded, my voice cracking as I fought the lump in my throat. "Please, don't leave me!" But Tyler remained motionless, his breathing shallow and weak.

When my eyes shot open, my body was drenched in sweat. I could hear the pounding of my heart in my ears and I looked

over. Relief flooded through me when I saw Tyler safely in bed next to me.

He stirred and his eyes opened. Once he saw me sitting up, he rose onto his elbow and reached out to place his hand on my arm. “Hey, are you okay?”

I slumped back as I tried to catch my breath. “Had a nightmare.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” He brushed his fingers along my wet cheek. “You’re crying.”

Taking a deep breath, I said, “I need to tell you about Jonah.”

TYLER

I SAT AT THE SMALL DESK IN MY ROOM, TRYING TO concentrate on an assignment for my music class, but the memory of Hayden admitting he loved me was too much of a distraction. It had started as a joke on my part, but knowing how he felt had given me the courage to confess that I loved him too.

When we met at Chrome, neither of us had any expectations beyond one night together. Yet even then, there had been a connection I couldn't deny, and as we continued to spend more time together, it had only grown. I hated that our relationship had to be a secret, but I wondered if it'd helped us build a stronger foundation without outside influences.

After learning more about his past, my heart hurt for Hayden. While my relationship with Ford hadn't been as serious as the one he'd shared with Jonah, I knew how painful it could be to be involved with someone who didn't know if they would ever be ready to go public. And I couldn't even imagine how hard it would be to lose a boyfriend the way he had.

Because we both had been in secret relationships before, I knew we were looking forward to the day when we didn't have to hide anymore. It was why his wanting to go on a date meant so much to me. He wasn't ashamed to be seen together;

instead, he was willing to take a risk to prove that what we had was real.

The only problem was having to wait another day before I got to see him again.

THE AFTERNOON DRAGGED ON. MY FRATERNITY WAS HOSTING a party later, which would be a nice distraction from me sitting around missing Hayden, but it would be several more hours until people started to show up.

Around six, I headed downstairs for dinner. There were a lot of things I'd miss about fraternity life after graduation, such as the friendships I had made and the satisfaction that came from the community service projects we had completed. But if I were being honest, the meals prepared by a chef three times a day was high on that list as well.

I grabbed a beer from the fridge before nabbing a plate of lasagna and joining Fallon and a few other frat brothers at the table.

"Haven't seen you around much," David commented around a bite of garlic bread.

I'd hoped my absence had gone unnoticed, but for three years, I'd been a consistent presence around the house, so, of course, not staying home every night was bound to garner some attention. However, since Hayden and I were trying to fly under the radar, and I didn't want to say too much, I just responded, "Yeah, I've had a lot going on."

Fallon smirked. "Are you sticking around for the party tonight?"

"That's the plan." I held up my beer. "And pre-gaming is about to start."

"Hell, yeah." Wilson tapped his bottle against mine. "Classes have kicked my ass this semester. I either need to get drunk or laid. Maybe both."

While the others joined in, discussing who they wanted to hook up with later, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, hoping it was Hayden, but I saw it was from Chase instead.

Hey! Aron just called me. Vaughn Evans wants to talk to you about a job opportunity with the band. Is it cool if I give him your number?

Flirting With Fire wanted to talk to me about a job? “No fucking way,” I gasped, drawing everyone’s eyes to me.

Fallon tilted his head and asked, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, but hold on.” I typed out my response to Chase:

Are you serious? Of course it's cool

Dad #2: Figured you'd say that. I'll pass along your number. You better call us later to tell us all about it

Me: Thanks! I will

A grin spread across my face as I placed my phone on the table.

“So, what’s got you so excited?” Fallon asked.

“My dad just texted me about a job opportunity. I don’t know any details yet, but it potentially could be a big deal.”

He stood and picked up his plate. “That’s awesome, man. I know you’ve been looking for something after graduation. I hope this works out for you.”

I nodded. “Me too.”

I finished eating dinner and then headed back up to my room. I was lying in bed, scrolling various social media apps, when my phone rang. The call was from an unknown number, which would usually keep me from answering, but thinking it might be Vaughn, I pressed the green accept button. “Hello,” I answered.

“Is this Tyler?”

“It is.”

“Hey, this is Vaughn Evans. Chase gave me your number. I hope that’s okay.”

I sat up. “Of course. He mentioned you might call.”

“Is this a good time to chat?”

“It is.” My palms were sweating. I couldn’t believe I was talking to *the* Vaughn Evans on the phone.

“Great. So, the guys and I were talking about doing something different during our upcoming world tour. We’ll be hitting the road in July, and we thought it’d be cool to have someone document the entire thing. It would be something our fans could subscribe to and get a behind-the-scenes look into what goes into our concerts. We remembered you mentioning you wanted to go into music journalism, so we thought you might be a good fit for this project. Do you think you might be interested?”

“Wow. I really appreciate you thinking of me. What would the job entail?”

“Well, you’d need to travel with us. We thought you could post some pictures and do a small write-up about what happens during each concert. Maybe even exclusive interviews with each of us.”

The job sounded amazing, and I felt confident I could do what they needed, but something—or rather someone—had me hesitating to accept. In the last couple of weeks, I’d been leaning more toward staying on the East Coast because I didn’t want to leave Hayden, even though I hadn’t found a job yet. However, could I really pass this up? “I don’t know what to say. It’s a great opportunity—”

“I hear a ‘but’ coming.” He chuckled.

“No, not a ‘but’. I just need to figure a few things out. How soon do you need an answer?”

“You probably have finals coming up and all that shit. Could you let me know by the beginning of June?” he asked.

I nodded my head, even though he couldn’t see me. “Yeah, I can let you know by then.”

“Okay. I look forward to hearing from you.”

“Thanks again,” I replied. “I’ll call you soon.”

“Sounds good. Later.”

“Later.”

I tossed my phone onto my bed and let out a long breath. Excitement and apprehension fought inside of me. My brain told me I’d be an idiot not to accept the job, while my heart wanted to stay with Hayden. I needed to talk to him before making a decision, but I would wait until our date when we could speak in person.

LATER THAT NIGHT, THE SIGMA HOUSE WAS FULL OF DRUNK students dancing, playing beer pong, and taking part in everything else that went down during our frat parties. Having already decided to spend the night letting loose and leave all adult decision-making for later, I poured myself another beer from the keg.

“Hey, Tyler,” Lia greeted as she grabbed a red plastic cup off the counter I was leaning against.

“Long time no see,” I replied, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “What have you been up to?”

She filled her cup to the brim. “Not much. Emily’s been lying low since Ford ghosted her after the last party, so we’ve avoided going out for a couple of weeks. I talked her into coming out tonight, but she ditched me the minute we walked in the door. I think she’s hunting for one of your frat bros to help her make him jealous.”

“Sounds like a lot of drama.”

She laughed. “That’s why I need alcohol.”

Once she had her drink, we moved toward the living room, where all the furniture had been pushed aside to create a makeshift dance floor. A couple of minutes later, I spotted Emily grinding against Wilson.

“Looks like she found someone.” I pointed to her friend.

Lia rolled her eyes. “That didn’t take long.”

I scanned the room for Ford to see if he was aware of what was going on. Not that I cared if he was bothered by Emily dancing with someone else, but I didn’t want things to pop off between him and Wilson. Although, based on him having begged me to give us another chance, I doubted he would be concerned about someone he had briefly hooked up with.

I finally spotted Ford waiting for his turn at beer pong. Either he hadn’t seen Emily, or, as I suspected, he didn’t give a shit about whatever she was doing.

Lia and I continued chatting for a bit before I finished the last of my beer and asked her if she wanted another.

She nodded, and we walked back to the kitchen. “Actually, that beer is pretty nasty.”

She wasn’t wrong. We usually bought cheap crap for our parties.

“It’s not the best,” I agreed.

“How about we do shots instead?” she suggested.

I shrugged. “Sure. What do you want? Tequila? Vodka?”

She pointed to a bottle filled with green liquid on the counter. “Let’s drink that.”

I checked the label and figured anything apple-flavored couldn’t be that bad. I poured us each a shot, which we immediately threw back. My mouth puckered at the sourness I hadn’t been expecting.

“You don’t like it?” she asked.

“It’s not the worst I’ve ever had.”

“Good. Let’s do another.”

Eventually, Emily joined us, looking dejected, and told Lia she was ready to go home. Lia swayed and grabbed hold of her friend.

“Are you going to be able to get her home okay?” I asked Emily. I’d lost count of how many shots we had taken and how much time had passed, but I was feeling the effects of the alcohol flowing through my system, so I could only imagine Lia was worse off since she was tiny compared to me.

“Yeah, I drove, and I haven’t been drinking.”

I did my best to help Emily get Lia into her car, which was parked a few houses away. After they drove off, I went back inside. The party was a bit more subdued as people were passed out drunk or busy hooking up. Deciding I was done for the night, I headed to my room.

As I reached the second floor, Ford appeared out of nowhere. “Are you going to bed already?”

My head began to spin, so I braced myself against the wall. “Yeah.”

“Oh.” He looked down at his feet. “I was hoping we might hang out for a bit.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

Was he kidding me? “You know why.”

“I didn’t realize you couldn’t hang out with your friends just because you’re seeing someone.”

“I’m not doing this with you right now,” I stated as I brushed past him.

“Tyler, wait.” He grabbed my arm, and before I could react, he pulled me to him and crashed his lips against mine.

The second his actions registered in my brain, I pushed him away. “What the hell are you doing?”

“C’mon. Things were good between us before. We could have that again.”

My eyes narrowed. “You need to stay the fuck away from me.”

I didn't give him a chance to respond before I slammed my door closed and collapsed on my bed.

THE NEXT DAY, I HID IN MY ROOM TO AVOID RUNNING INTO Ford until it was time to leave for Hayden's. We were meeting at his place, and then he would drive us into the city for dinner.

My stomach was tangled up in knots during the ride to his house. I'd been looking forward to our date, but now I needed to talk to him about the job offer from Flirting with Fire, and I was debating whether to tell him what Ford had done the night before.

When Hayden answered his door, all other thoughts left my head as I focused on how incredibly sexy he looked in his burgundy button-up shirt that stretched across his toned chest and dark denim pants.

"You look hot," I gushed as I leaned in for a kiss.

After we broke apart, he looked me up and down. "So do you."

My face heated under the intensity of his gaze. "Maybe we can skip dinner and go straight to dessert instead."

He seemed to consider it for a minute, but then shook his head. "No way. I spent all of yesterday looking forward to this date. You're not getting out of it now."

"Fine," I huffed playfully. "Let's go."

Hayden drove us into the city and parked his SUV in the garage across from the pier where the restaurant was located. He laced his fingers with mine and we walked toward the French bistro. Holding his hand was such a small gesture, yet it filled me with pride that he was happy to be seen in public with me. It had been a long time since I could be openly affectionate with someone, and I looked forward to when we could be seen together every day.

He gave the maître d' his name, and we were led to our table right away. Although it was doubtful we'd run into anyone we knew, he'd requested a table toward the back of the restaurant to give us some privacy.

We were handed our menus and told that our server would be with us soon. I took a quick glance around the restaurant. The low lighting and candles on every table helped to make us feel secluded and gave off a romantic vibe.

"You went all out tonight, didn't you?" I teased, feeling a bit out of my element.

He smiled. "This is my parents' favorite restaurant. I haven't been here in a while, but I thought you would enjoy it."

"Good evening," our server greeted us a moment later. "My name is Nick, and I'll be taking care of you tonight. Would you like to see our wine list?"

"Yes, please," Hayden replied.

Nick handed over a leather-bound menu and explained he'd give us a minute to make our selection.

Hayden looked at me. "Do you prefer red or white?"

"I don't usually drink wine," I said sheepishly. "I'm sure I'll enjoy whatever you choose."

When Nick returned, Hayden ordered a bottle of pinot noir.

"Everything looks good," I said as we perused our menus. "Any idea what you're going to order?"

"I usually get the coq au vin, but I also highly recommend their filet mignon."

Nick presented the pinot noir and removed the cork before pouring a small amount for Hayden to try. After he gave his approval, the waiter poured us each a glass and then took our food order. I went with Hayden's suggestion and got the filet mignon.

After sipping the wine, I brought up the job offer. "So, I received an interesting phone call yesterday."

Hayden lifted an eyebrow. “Really? From who?”

“Do you remember the band Flirting with Fire that played at the softball game?”

“Of course. I love their music.”

“Well.” I hesitated for a moment and then said, “They offered me a job.”

“Seriously? That’s amazing. What will you be doing?”

I explained what the band wanted, and he seemed genuinely happy for me, but then he asked the question that I feared would put an end to his excitement. “So, you’ll be gone for six months?”

I swallowed. “Yeah.”

His face fell. “I see.”

Our server brought out our food, halting our conversation for a minute.

“I haven’t said yes,” I muttered after Nick walked away.

Hayden swallowed a bite of his chicken. “Why not?”

I shrugged. “I think you know why.”

“Tyler, it’s a great opportunity.” His lips formed a tight smile. While he tried to convince me, I could tell by the look on his face it was as though I’d stabbed him in the heart with the knife I was using to cut my steak.

“I know. I asked for some time to think about it.” I picked at the food on my plate.

He placed his hand over mine that rested on the table. “Whatever you decide, I’ll support you.”

That made me feel a bit better. “I appreciate that, and I’m sorry for bringing down the mood. We can talk more about this later.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

Thankfully, our conversation moved on to more lighthearted topics, and I finally tasted the tender cut of beef.

“I think that was the best meal and cheesecake I’ve ever had,” I admitted as Hayden handed over his credit card before I had the chance to offer to pay the bill. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But don’t forget you promised to put out if I bought you dinner.” He winked, and I was relieved to know I hadn’t completely ruined the evening.

Nick returned with the receipt for Hayden to sign, and I excused myself to the men’s room.

As I stood at the sink, washing my hands, the door pushed open. Glancing in the mirror, I watched as the last person I expected to see stepped inside.

I spun around. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m having dinner with my parents. Was that Professor Foster I saw you with?” Ford hooked his thumb in the direction of where Hayden was still sitting.

I didn’t think Ford knew who Hayden was, but then it dawned on me that he would have seen him at the softball game, and we had thanked him by name during our closing announcements.

Hayden and I had been so careful, and now one word from my ex could ruin it all. My heart pounded as I tried to think of any excuse for why I was at a restaurant in the city with my teacher. I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

Ford’s eyes widened, and I could tell he was putting the pieces together. “Oh my god, that’s who you’ve been seeing, isn’t it?”

“Ford—” I held up my hand.

“I can’t believe you’re fucking your professor.”

I saw red as I seethed, “Anything having to do with me is no longer your business.” Before he could say anything else, I stormed out of the restroom. “We need to go,” I barked as soon as I returned to the table.

Hayden flinched. “What? Why?”

“I’ll explain in the car, but we need to go now.”

HAYDEN

TYLER WAS FREAKING ME OUT.

I had no idea why we had to hightail it out of the restaurant like the place was on fire, but something—or someone—had freaked him out while he was in the restroom. At first, I thought maybe he was ready for *second dessert*, but as he kept looking back toward the bathroom, I knew that wasn't the case.

“Tell me what’s going on,” I pleaded as I followed him outside.

“In the car, okay?”

I nodded my assent and followed him to my SUV across the street in the parking garage. After unlocking the doors with the fob, we slid inside. Tyler turned and looked back where we'd just come from.

“What is it?” I glanced behind us, but didn't see anyone.

“Just start driving.”

“Did someone see us?” I asked, not able to start the car or do anything until I knew what was happening.

Tyler nodded, still watching out the window.

“Who?” I demanded, my heart racing.

“My ex.”

I blinked. “The one you live with?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit.” I blew out a breath.

In an instant, I knew things were about to change. The secrecy, the stolen moments, the hidden glances—everything. Why did I think driving into the city was far enough away that we wouldn’t get caught? I didn’t know how Tyler and his ex had ended things, but for him to act as though we’d just robbed a bank, I assumed it hadn’t been on good terms.

“What do we do?” he asked.

How the hell was I supposed to know? I’d never been in a position where the weight of someone knowing who I was dating caused a suffocating grip on my heart, but I was now. This differed from Charlotte knowing because she understood the consequences if she told the dean. Tyler’s ex was an ex for a reason. Would he report me right away? Would he want to get me fired?

“Is he going to tell?” I asked, but by the way Tyler was acting, I had to think he was worried his ex would.

“I don’t know. He wants to get back together—”

“What?” I seethed, turning the best I could in my seat to face him. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought I had it handled since I’d told him I was dating someone, and I didn’t want to get back together with him.”

“Clearly you didn’t, and now he’s going to say something.” If his ex wanted Tyler back, he’d probably stop at nothing to achieve his goal and we’d just given the guy enough ammunition to break us apart.

“He might not. Fallon has known for a while and hasn’t said anything—”

“What do you mean Fallon has known?” I snapped.

He lifted a shoulder. “He figured it out after we got snowed in together.”

“You didn’t think to share that with me?”

“I didn’t want you to freak out, and I trust him.”

“And what about your ex?” I pressed.

“I don’t know,” he whispered, closing his eyes and leaning back on the headrest.

As we sat in silence for several moments, no one came into the garage. I didn’t start the car to leave. Instead, I ran my hands down my face and took a deep breath, willing myself to find the strength to utter the words that I knew were the right ones to say. “Tyler,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “We have to end this. Now that three people know, it’s too risky for us to continue. We’re so close to school ending and we can’t jeopardize your future.”

He looked at me. “I’ll talk to Ford and he won’t say anything.”

“You don’t know that. We’ve known all along being together was a gamble. I had hoped we would be okay, but I can’t be selfish about this.” A lump was forming in my throat. I had been greedy with Jonah, but I wouldn’t make the same mistake with Tyler.

In the yellow glow of the parking garage lights, I could see Tyler’s eyes had become glassy. “You’re not being selfish. We can just keep our distance until school is over.”

I shook my head. “I would if it were that easy, but from the beginning we haven’t been able to stop ourselves from being together. It will only be harder now because I love you.”

“I love you too, which is why I don’t think we need to break up.”

I swallowed the knot in my throat. “You have a job offer that will take you away for a while, and we already knew it was going to be difficult having a long-distance relationship when you moved back to California.”

“I haven’t accepted the offer yet. Maybe—”

“I can’t ask you to choose me over your dream job.”

A single tear slipped down his cheek, and my heart shattered into a million irreparable pieces. I wanted to wipe it

away, to tell him that everything would be all right, but I knew I couldn't. Our love had become a ticking time bomb, threatening to explode and demolish everything in its path. Walking away was the right thing to do.

I reached out a trembling hand, wanting desperately to hold him, to ease his pain. But I couldn't. I couldn't let myself get lost in his touch because it would only make saying goodbye more unbearable. I let my hand fall back to my side, feeling only the emptiness of the space between us.

"I can't stand the thought of losing you," he whispered.

I closed my eyes, trying to block out the pain that radiated through every fiber of my being. "I don't want to lose you either, Tyler." My voice trembled. "But we have to protect ourselves."

"And what if he doesn't tell? What if we break up for no reason?"

"And what if he does?" I argued. "What if you get suspended, don't graduate, and lose everything you've worked so hard for?"

Silence hung heavy in the air, suffocating us both as we faced the unbearable weight of our decision. The SUV felt small and claustrophobic, as if it were closing in around us, mirroring the walls we had built around our hearts to keep our love hidden.

"So, this is it?" he asked.

Tears streamed down my face, and I felt my resolve crumbling like a sandcastle dissolving beneath relentless waves. I wanted to scream, to fight against the unfairness of it all. But I knew deep down this was the only choice we had.

Tyler was only twenty-two and had his entire life ahead of him. He'd regret risking his future for a relationship. Even though we were in love and I wanted to see how our future could unfold together, I couldn't let him pass up an opportunity to live out his dream.

"Yes," I sobbed. "I'm sorry."

Our tear-filled eyes locked, and he said, “I’ll never forget you, Hayden. No matter what happens, you’ll always be a part of me.”

“And I’ll always love you.”

He opened the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I’m going to call a rideshare to take me home.”

“I can drive you.”

He shook his head and stepped out. “That’s not a good idea and you know it.”

Without another word, he shut the door and walked away. No matter how much I wanted to run after him, to tell him I’d changed my mind, I knew it was for the best.

Once he was out of sight, I started my car and drove out of the garage. I stared through the windshield as I navigated the familiar streets, but the road ahead was hazy from the tears that blurred my vision.

Every turn and stoplight felt like a cruel reminder of what once was. Memories flooded my mind, moments of joy and intimacy that now seemed distant, almost surreal. The laughter, the shared secrets, the simple pleasure of holding him in my arms—it all felt like a dream slipping through my fingers.

I reached out and turned up the volume on the radio, desperate for some form of distraction. But the music only served as a backdrop to my pain, the lyrics taunting me with their cruel irony so I turned it off.

Once I finally pulled into my driveway, the reality of what had just happened settled upon me. I sat there for a moment, letting the tears flow freely, letting the pain wash over me like a torrential downpour. What would happen now? How was class tomorrow going to be? Would Tyler even show? I would understand if he didn’t.

With a heavy sigh, I unbuckled my seatbelt and stepped out of my SUV. As I closed the car door behind me, I knew

deep in my heart that this was not the end. I would heal, I would grow, and I would find solace in the fragments of our shattered love, just like I had when Jonah died.

I DIDN'T SLEEP A WINK. THE ENTIRE NIGHT, I TOSSED AND turned as I thought about every word we had said in the parking garage. Questioned if I had made the right decision. Shouldn't the right decision feel less painful?

When my alarm went off, I got up, showered, ate breakfast, and had coffee. I went through all the motions of getting my day started, knowing I had no other choice. I started to hope Tyler didn't show for the rest of the school year. It would be easier for both of us, and he already had the grades to pass, but when I walked into the classroom, he was there sitting next to Fallon just as he had the entire semester.

I felt his eyes on me as I made my way to the front table. When I glanced up, our eyes connected, and the pain in his stare mirrored exactly how I felt. He looked as though he hadn't gotten any sleep either. I gave him a sad smile and then got class started.

THE CLASSROOM WAS BUZZING WITH ACTIVITY AS STUDENTS engaged in lively discussions about their final portfolios. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the door creak open, and Dean Watson, a stern-looking man in his early fifties, stepped inside. Immediately, I found Tyler and we made eye contact. We both knew why the dean was in my classroom.

My heart skipped a beat, and a knot formed in my stomach. I glanced at the clock, noting we only had two minutes until class was over. I swallowed hard, trying to maintain my composure, and said, "All right, everyone. You have ideas. Go out and capture them. If you have questions, you can email me or come by my office."

Everyone gathered their belongings, and Dean Watson walked toward me. With one last glance at Tyler, I turned my attention to my boss.

“Well, this is a surprise,” I said.

Dean Watson’s gaze was unyielding, and I braced myself for whatever he had to say. Once the last student left the room, he cleared his throat. “I honestly never thought I’d come to your classroom under these circumstances.”

“Oh?” I drew my head back slightly, as though I had no idea why he was visiting.

He nodded. “I’ve received a concerning report that you are involved in a romantic relationship with one of your students.”

Even though I had suspected the reason for his visit to my classroom, my eyes widened as if I was surprised. “What? Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately, I am. The person claims they saw you and a student out to dinner last night.”

“Dean Watson, I can assure you that whatever you heard is false. I’ve maintained strict professional boundaries with all my students, and I take ethics very seriously.” The lie felt heavy on my tongue, but I had to protect Tyler and myself.

“There are only a few weeks left of school, as you know. However, Hawkins University doesn’t take allegations like this lightly, considering the implications of such a relationship. I expect your full cooperation in this matter.”

“Absolutely.”

“As educators, it’s imperative that we maintain the trust and respect of our students. I hope you realize the potential consequences if these allegations are true.”

I nodded, my voice a mix of determination and remorse. “I understand completely, and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to clear my name and uphold the integrity of this institution.”

“Since the person who made the report didn’t offer any proof, there won’t be an investigation at this time, but I will start one if any more accusations are made. Until then, I expect

you to continue your teaching duties, while maintaining absolute professionalism.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you.”

We exchanged a brief, meaningful glance before Dean Watson walked away, leaving me to deal with the uncertainty that lay ahead.

TYLER

MY STOMACH DROPPED THE MOMENT DEAN WATSON WALKED into class. When Hayden dismissed us, I wanted to hang back, but I knew it would only make the situation worse. If the dean was there because Ford said something, my presence would only confirm my ex's report. And if he was there for another reason, my refusal to leave would be suspicious as hell. With nothing else to do, I grabbed my bag and made a quick exit.

"You okay?" Fallon asked as we stepped into the hallway. "You've been quiet all morning."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I lied.

I'd managed to sneak into my room the night before without anyone noticing, which was good since my puffy eyes and tear-stained face would have been enough to cause alarm. When Fallon knocked on my door earlier this morning, I'd told him I had overslept and would meet him in class.

I wanted to avoid him asking me any more questions because I was barely hanging on and knew as soon as I told him about Hayden, it would break me. Actually, that wasn't true; I was already completely shattered.

Fallon frowned. "Not sure I buy that. Just know if you need to talk, I'm here."

Another round of tears blurred my vision, but I blinked them back. "I appreciate it. I'll catch you later."

“Later.” He squeezed my shoulder before heading in the opposite direction toward his next class.

Like most Mondays, I made my way to The Daily Grind to kill some time before my Music Industry Analysis class. I ordered my drink and found an open table near the window. My stomach rolled as I thought about Hayden and Dean Watson. There were plenty of innocent reasons the dean might want to speak to a faculty member, but I couldn’t ignore the timing of his visit.

Unable to push past the overwhelming sense of dread consuming me, I pulled out my phone and typed a message:

I’m freaking out. What’s going on?

Several minutes went by as I gripped the phone so tight my knuckles turned white and watched the screen, waiting for a reply.

The more time that passed without an answer, the more I feared Hayden would continue to ignore me as he had in class. Maybe it was his way of completely cutting ties, and the thought of that shredded whatever was left of my heart.

I wanted to fight for him ... for us, yet when I thought about what he had said when he’d broken things off with me, it appeared he had already given up on us. He made it sound like me taking the job with Flirting with Fire was a forgone conclusion, and things wouldn’t have lasted anyway. He didn’t realize that I would have done anything to make sure we could be together.

Eventually, it was time for me to go to class. Since we had a test, I was forced to silence my phone for the following two hours. As soon as I hit submit on the online assessment, I snatched my bag and hurried outside.

I sighed in relief when I saw Hayden had texted me back.

Everything is fine. You don’t need to worry

His response did nothing to ease my fears.

Me: That's it? You've got to give me more than that

HF: There's not much to say. Someone told Dean Watson they saw me with a student but didn't give him proof. He said there won't be an investigation but that could change if he gets more information

Me: Thank god. So we're good? I told you we didn't need to break up

If there wasn't going to be an investigation, then we just needed to be more careful until graduation.

HF: Nothing has changed. You'll still be gone for six months after graduation

Me: I told you I hadn't accepted the job yet

HF: There's only one choice and you know it

A heavy breath passed my lips. I needed to speak to him in person so we could work things out.

I rushed across campus and went straight to his office, only to find the door locked and no lights on inside. Frustrated with the entire situation, I sent another text:

We need to talk. Can I come over tonight?

It didn't take him long to respond:

That's not a good idea. It will only make things harder. Besides Dean Watson said he's going to be watching me and I'm sure Ford will be doing the same with you

The mention of Ford's name had me seeing red. Amid my heartbreak and the stress of what had happened that morning, I hadn't had time to dwell on my feelings about my ex's role in everything.

But that was about to change.

PURE RAGE CONSUMED ME AS MY FEET POUNDED AGAINST THE sidewalk on my way back to the house. I hoped, like most Monday afternoons, that no one else was home because I didn't want an audience around when I confronted Ford.

The door slammed against the wall when I pushed it open.

Fallon raced down the stairs and came to a screeching halt when he saw me. "What the fuck?"

I could feel the heat radiating from my cheeks, and there was no doubt in my mind my outward appearance mirrored how I was feeling on the inside. "Is Ford here?" I sneered, glancing into the empty chapter room for any sign of the asshole.

"I don't know. We walked home together, but I've been in my room since then."

I brushed past him and barreled into the kitchen and found the person I was looking for standing at the island. His eyes widened as I approached.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I yelled as I shoved him backward. "Are you trying to ruin my life?"

Fallon immediately stepped between us, planting his hand against my chest. "You need to calm down. I have no idea what's going on, but you know we have rules and don't tolerate violence in this fraternity."

"I don't give a fuck about the rules." I lunged toward Ford again, but Fallon wouldn't budge and kept a firm hold on my shoulders.

Ford continued to stare at me, and his silence did nothing but rile me up more.

"Why did you do it?" I shouted.

"You know why," he whispered.

"So, what? You thought reporting me to the dean would make me take you back? Do you realize how stupid that sounds?"

Fallon spun around to face Ford. “What’s he talking about?”

“I didn’t report you to the dean,” Ford argued, ignoring Fallon’s question.

“Bullshit!”

“I promise I didn’t say anything about you,” he implored. “I only said I saw Professor Foster out with a student. I never mentioned your name.”

I threw my hands in the air. “It doesn’t matter. You fucked everything up.”

“Tyler, please—”

“Stay the hell away from me. I want nothing to do with you.” I stormed out of the kitchen and went straight to my room. Staying to argue with Ford wouldn’t do any good, and if I wasn’t careful, he could change his mind and go back to Dean Watson with more information.

As soon as my bedroom door shut behind me, I pulled out a duffle bag and began tossing some clothes inside.

“Where are you going?” Fallon asked.

I hadn’t heard him come in. “I don’t know, but I can’t stay here with him.”

“I get that, but why don’t you take a minute and talk to me? I’m not even sure what all happened out there. How did Ford find out about you and Professor Foster? And why do you think he filed a report to get back together with you? I thought you guys were ancient history.”

I flopped onto my bed and ran a hand over my face. “A while back, he said he thought he’d made a mistake breaking up with me and wanted us to get back together.”

Fallon’s mouth fell open. “Seriously?”

“Yep,” I huffed. “I told him I was seeing someone else, but he didn’t seem to take a hint. He kissed me during the party Saturday night.”

Fallon rolled his eyes. “What a tool.”

“Agreed. Anyway, Hayden and I wanted to go on an actual date, and we thought if we went to the city, no one would see us. It just so happened we ended up at the same place where Ford was having dinner with his parents. He confronted me in the bathroom, and we argued a bit before I left.”

“And he reported it, and that’s why the dean showed up in class this morning.”

It wasn’t a question, but I nodded anyway.

“Have you talked to Professor Foster since you left class?”

“I texted him.”

“And?” Fallon sat on the chair across from me.

“He said the dean isn’t going to open an investigation with no proof.”

“That’s good, right?”

A fresh wave of tears stung my eyes. “It doesn’t matter anymore. After I told him about Ford catching us, Hayden broke up with me.”

“He did?” he gasped.

I took a shuddering breath. “He said we needed to end things because it was too risky. He thinks I need to take the job I was offered, and a long-distance relationship would be too difficult.”

“What job?”

I forgot I hadn’t told Fallon the details about the call I had received from Vaughn. “Flirting with Fire asked me to go on tour with them and write a blog to give fans a behind-the-scenes look at what happens on the road.”

“Oh, wow. That’s an amazing opportunity. Were you actually considering not taking the job?”

I shrugged. “I hadn’t decided yet. A part of me hoped I’d find something around here and stay in the area after graduation.”

“Because of Professor Foster.”

I nodded.

“It’s probably not the best time to make any major decisions, at least until you have a clear head. And I don’t think you should go anywhere either.” He eyed the bag on my bed.

“If I have to see Ford, I don’t know if I’ll be able to control myself.” The anger I’d felt earlier was building in my chest again.

“I told him to wait downstairs for me, and I’m going to talk to him,” Fallon explained. “He needs to be reminded of what this fraternity stands for and that we don’t throw our brothers under the bus. I promise he won’t be a problem anymore.”

I gave him a sad smile. “Thanks.”

He stood to leave. “That’s what friends are for. If you need anything, I’ve got your back.”

After Fallon left my room, I laid on my bed, emotionally drained from the last twenty-four hours. Only one thing could make me feel better, so I picked up my phone, desperate to hear Hayden’s voice.

Despite being unsure if he would answer, I scrolled through my contacts and called him. It rang several times before it went to voicemail, and I hung up without leaving a message.

A few tears escaped as the realization that things were truly over between us hit me like a freight train. My hands shook as I scrolled for Vaughn’s name in my contacts. Regardless of what Fallon said about having a clear head, I knew I had no other option.

I typed out my message and took a deep breath before hitting send.

No turning back now. My decision had been made.

HAYDEN

IT HAD BEEN YEARS SINCE I *FELT* THE QUIETNESS OF MY HOUSE. The air hung heavy with silence, only occasionally interrupted by the distant sounds of passing cars outside. It had been almost two weeks since I watched Tyler get out of my SUV and walk away, taking a piece of my heart with him.

I sighed heavily and dragged myself toward the window, drawn to the gloomy drizzle outside. The raindrops matched the rhythm of my heart, falling relentlessly as if the heavens themselves understood my sorrow and pain. Would it ever get easier? Would I ever find happiness? I thought I had found it with Tyler.

Needing to get my caffeine fix to start my day, I turned toward the kitchen, only for my gaze to drift to the framed photograph of the Eiffel Tower on my wall. The photo was one of my favorites and the reason I had it hanging up, but as I looked at it, it only reminded me of Tyler. It wasn't because we were together when I took it—because we weren't—but because the night we met, he'd asked about it. Then, of course, he'd found an image of the famous landmark at night as his first project and had talked about how taking pictures of it lit up was illegal. He'd told me that day in class that he had always been a rule follower, but was tempted to break them. His words were laced with innuendo about going against school policy, which only I understood at the time. However,

when we faced the reality of it all, I was the one who couldn't continue our forbidden relationship.

I made my way to the kitchen, and as the coffee brewed, I leaned against the countertop, staring blankly into the distance. I couldn't help but continue to replay the moments leading up to our breakup repeatedly in my mind. I wanted to kick myself for being so impatient to go on a date because I knew without question that if we'd waited, we would still be together and Dean Watson wouldn't be monitoring me. We could have stayed in our bubble for another month and been happy. Maybe forever.

But I also had to remind myself about the job offer he had gotten from Flirting with Fire and my busy schedule now that baseball season was in full swing. Maybe we would have broken up regardless. The thought didn't make my heart hurt any less, but at least there were only two more weeks of school until graduation and then I could move on.

Or could I?

ON THE FIRST FRIDAY OF EVERY MONTH, *THE HUB* HELD A mandatory staff meeting for all departments. It was a way for my parents to keep tabs on what was happening in the company, to help cover any upcoming events, and plan out the coming month.

Walking into the three-story brick building, I greeted everyone with a fake smile and continued toward the office I used only a few times a week. I set my bags down and just as I was turning to go to the main conference room, my mother popped her head in.

“Good morning, son.”

My phony smile widened, and I reached out my arms to hug her. “Morning.”

She eyed me curiously as she leaned back slightly, her arms still around me. “What's wrong?”

I shook my head and stepped back. “Nothing. Why?”

“Something’s going on with you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I’m your mother and I can tell.”

Could she? Sure, she saw me a few times a week in passing, but she had no idea I had been dating Tyler or that we’d broken up. However, there was no reason to lie to her.

“I was dating someone, and we just ended things.”

Her bottom lip protruded as she frowned. “I’m so sorry, honey. I had no idea you were seeing anyone.”

“It’s fine.” It surprised me how easily those two words spilled from my lips because it wasn’t fine at all.

“Okay, well, if you want to talk about it, you know where to find me.”

I had never gone to my mother for relationship advice. When Jonah died, she knew without me saying anything, but I never told her the details. It wasn’t as if I didn’t trust her, but she’d been with my father for over forty years and had no clue what I was going through.

“Thanks, Mom.”

She turned to leave. “See you in the conference room.”

A few minutes later, I made my way to the boardroom, saying hello to more co-workers and then taking a seat in my usual spot next to the head of the table where my father ran the meeting with my mother seated on his other side. As it began, I didn’t pay attention. It wasn’t because I didn’t care, but because my schedule was all about baseball and I had nothing new to report. However, when my mom spoke about summer interns, my ears perked up.

“It’s that time of year again. We’re looking for some fresh faces who are eager to get into journalism to join us as summer interns. We need talented individuals who are passionate about news and storytelling. It’s an opportunity for them to learn from the best and gain real-world experience.

Now, I want each of you to spread the word and find potential candidates.”

My mind immediately went to Tyler. He was going to make an excellent journalist, but it was too late. He probably had his plane ticket for California already.

THE RED SOX HAD WON THEIR MONDAY NIGHT GAME AGAINST the Baltimore Orioles. Before I left the city, I drove by the bar where I'd met Coop a few times for drinks. I wasn't the type to go to a bar and drink alone, but going home to a quiet house wasn't something I wanted to do either.

I found a parking spot in a garage across the street from the restaurant and then went straight to the back of the building where the speakeasy-style bar was located. To my surprise, Coop was there with some buddies. He didn't spot me, so before I said hello to them, I went to the bar and ordered a Jameson neat.

Coop clapped me on the shoulder. “You're just going to walk in and not say hi?”

I looked over as he leaned on the bar top. “Just getting my drink first.”

He motioned for the bartender to get him another of whatever he was drinking. “I didn't know you were coming here tonight. Let me grab you a chair at the table.”

I shook my head. “I've just come for a few drinks. Not really in a socializing mood.”

“Everything okay?”

The two words I'd told my mother wanted to topple out of my mouth again, but this was Coop and he'd confided in me, so I felt as though I could tell him everything wasn't fine. “Just dealing with a breakup.”

“Oh wow. I'm sorry to hear that.” He frowned slightly.

“Thanks, man.”

“You said you don’t want to socialize, but I’m here if you want to talk about it.” The bartender placed Coop’s beer in front of him and Coop took a sip.

“That’s ...” I hesitated.

I hadn’t talked to anyone about my break-up and maybe that was why I was having such a hard time. A month after Jonah died, I started seeing a therapist. Having someone listen and let me get my hurt out was freeing. Of course, it took much longer to get over Jonah’s death and I didn’t think I would ever truly be okay with his passing, but having the means to voice my pain had been liberating. And maybe that was what I needed. Maybe telling someone I was hurting would be a relief and allow me to pick up the pieces of my heart and start gluing them back together. I wasn’t sure if Coop would understand mine and Tyler’s dynamics, but at least I could get it off my chest.

I stepped to the corner of the bar, which stood against the wall, and motioned for Coop to follow. He slid his beer over and I asked, “Remember how I told you I was a professor at Hawkins University?” Coop nodded, and I continued. “Well, one night I went out to a club, hooked up with a total stranger. We didn’t share names, but then four days later, he walked into my class at the start of the semester.”

“Oh shit,” he breathed.

“Yeah.” I sighed. “We tried to stay away from each other, but we had this undeniable attraction. Eventually, we couldn’t resist each other any longer and started messing around. That led to us dating and then ...” I paused and closed my eyes. Taking a deep breath, I went on. “And then his ex, who goes to Hawkins too, saw us out together. I decided we needed to call things off. Good thing too, because that guy went to the dean and reported me.”

“Oh shit,” Coop gasped.

“I know.” I downed my whiskey in one giant gulp.

“I’m so sorry.” He squeezed my shoulder. “I have no idea what you’re going through, but it can’t be easy. You’re still

having to see him in class, huh?”

“Today was the last one. He’ll be graduating and moving back to California.”

“But if school is over, then you’ll no longer be his professor, right?”

“Once I turn in his final grade I won’t be.”

“Then why not get back together?” he wondered. “He doesn’t have to move back to California, does he?”

“He got a job working for Flirting with Fire. They’re based in LA, but are headed out on tour for six months.”

Coop’s eyes widened. “Wasn’t that the band that performed at the softball game?”

I nodded. “It was.”

“Damn, and I bet you’re busy with your work here.”

“Yep. Working on eighty-one home games for the Red Sox. Baseball is my busiest season.”

“And there’s no way for a long-distance thing to work?”

I shook my head. “Not sure he’d want that since I broke his heart.”

“There has to be some way.”

“I don’t know. We have internships at *The Hub*, but I can’t ask him to give up his dream job for me.”

“Maybe you should tell him about it, and let him make the choice.”

I WOULD LIKE TO SAY THE LAST FEW WEEKS HAD FLOWN BY, but the reality was, no matter how much I immersed myself in work or grading my students’ final portfolios, Tyler was always on my mind. When I’d seen his final project arrive in my inbox, I wanted to mark it as “read” and then move on to

the next and just give him an A+. But not only was it unethical to do that, I was curious to see what he had submitted.

So, I'd opened the email and there was nothing written in the body of the message, only a link for the folder that contained his project. I didn't blame him or need more. It wasn't as though he would tell me he missed me in a communication that the school might see.

Once I looked at the portfolio, I realized he had used his final photos to send me hidden messages.

The first image was of his guitar. He'd told me before he played, but as I read the details he included, I understood why he was submitting it as one of his eight images. The caption read: *Playing guitar has always been a passion of mine. The way my fingers glide across the strings effortlessly and produces a melody makes me happy like when I held hands with the man I love as we went on our first date.*

Scrolling through the rest of the photos, I spotted a picture of a steak dinner with a glass of wine. The photograph of the frozen lake with the sunburst I had emailed him after our weekend together in the mountains. He had taken the photo with my camera, but I had sent him all the pictures so he could have them. In Tyler's assignment, there was also a shot of the table where his fraternity held their meetings. When I got to the one of me, I was speechless. I hadn't been aware he had taken any of me at the Anaheim game, but apparently, he had. I had been engrossed in the action on the ice, my camera up to my face and my finger on the shutter. The crowd in the background was blurred and the main focus was on me. Tyler's caption read: *Your eyes see the beauty of our planet. Mine see my world.*

A lump formed in my throat, and I went to the last image. It was a self-portrait of him in black and white. The photo only showed his face and he had tears in his eyes. I could feel the pain radiating off of the image as though we were face to face. Looking at it, I couldn't hold back my own hurt. A tear slid down my cheek as I read the quote: *Giving up someone is hard when you know he is everything you want.*

I'd given him an A+ and tried to forget his portfolio as I had with the rest of my students, but I couldn't. The week since I'd viewed it had been even harder because I knew what he had done, but I couldn't reach out and tell him I was feeling the same way. Tyler had dreams to chase and would be gone for six months. Maybe afterward we could try again. Perhaps then everything would be easier, or maybe he would find someone else.

Knowing it might be the last time I ever saw him again, I dreaded the drive over to campus for the graduation ceremony. I didn't usually go, but I couldn't stay away. This was an important time for Tyler, and I didn't want to miss it.

Sitting with the other faculty, I wasn't sure if Tyler saw me as I blended in and watched him walk across the stage. He looked ecstatic as he fist-pumped the air after grabbing his degree from Dean Watson. Maybe the week since he had turned in his portfolio had been different for him. I didn't know, but I enjoyed seeing his wide smile. My heart was happy, and I told myself that he would be okay. He would move on, live out his dreams, and eventually find someone who could give him everything he deserved.

I had planned to leave once the ceremony was over, but I found myself walking toward Tyler and his family. I didn't know why, other than I wanted to congratulate him. To tell him how proud I was of him.

He was in the middle of talking to his father when he saw me approaching. The conversation stopped and his dad looked to see what had made Tyler's words end. Plastering on a smile, I picked up my pace and stuck out my hand to the man I still loved.

"Congratulations, Mr. Statler."

He took my hand hesitantly and replied, "Thank you."

I turned to Gage and held out my hand. "Your son is going to do remarkable work in the journalism field. You should be very proud."

"I am," he confirmed and Chase stepped to his side.

I shook Chase's hand too and then told Tyler, "I just wanted to come over and wish you all the best while you're on tour with Flirting with Fire. I'm hoping to go to their show in Boston."

"Um ... that sounds good, Professor Foster."

I smiled warmly. "I'm no longer your professor, Tyler. You can call me Hayden."

I waved a little goodbye and turned to head to my office, where I needed to pack up some things I would need during the summer. I could feel Tyler's eyes on me as I walked away, but I didn't turn back.

If I did, I knew he would see the pain I was trying to hide because telling him I was no longer his professor was supposed to be the moment we had waited months for.

Now it just hurt because I wouldn't see him in my class, or ever again.

TYLER

MY CHEST TIGHTENED AS I WATCHED HAYDEN. THE NEED TO chase after him was nearly impossible to ignore, and I had to choke back a sob that threatened to escape. I'd experienced heartbreak in my life, but nothing had ever physically hurt like the pain of watching the man I was still in love with walk away. When he waved goodbye, it felt like he had hammered the final nail in the coffin of our relationship.

What he didn't know was that I refused to accept this was the way things would end for us. He may have thought he was doing the right thing by not standing between me and what he believed was my dream job, but he didn't get to make that decision for me.

With my attention on Hayden's retreating form, I jumped slightly when Fallon clapped me on the back. "I can't believe we're finally done."

"No kidding." I sighed and pried my eyes away from Hayden. "It feels like we've been here forever."

"You got any big plans tonight?" he asked.

"Just dinner with the fam. What about you?"

"Same. Everyone's in town"—he gestured at a large group of people waiting off to the side—"because my father's making a big announcement tomorrow."

I glanced toward his family and recognized his parents. In addition to the others who looked like Fallon's relatives, a couple men in black suits stood nearby. "Oh yeah? What's going on?"

"My dad's going to run for president."

"Wow. How do you feel about that?"

He shrugged. "It's been his goal for years, and he told us months ago that it was time. Can't say I'm a huge fan of the security detail following us around now though, even if some of them are hot as hell."

I chuckled. "I can see the headlines now: 'President's son caught in compromising position with Secret Service agent'."

"Like I'd get caught." He smacked my stomach playfully. "Anyway, I gotta run, but I'll see you at the house tomorrow."

"Later."

My dad wrapped his arm around my shoulder as Fallon walked away. "We've got about an hour before we need to head to the restaurant. Do you want to hang out with us at the hotel or stay here for a bit?"

Fearing it might be a few days before I got another opportunity to talk to Hayden, I decided to take a chance that he was still on campus. "I'm going to stay here for a while and meet you at the restaurant. There's something I need to do first."

"Okay. Let us know if you need a ride," Chase said.

"Will do," I called out as I hurried out of the amphitheater and toward where Hayden had gone.

Once I made my way through the crowds surrounding Caldwell Theater, the rest of the campus was mostly empty without the hustle and bustle of students rushing to class. I approached Miller Hall and hoped it was unlocked. Luckily the doors were open, and I took a fortifying breath as I stepped inside. The hallway was eerily quiet, every room I passed was dark, and no one appeared to be around.

As I turned the corner, light streamed from the end of the corridor. Was it Hayden or someone else?

Suddenly the confidence I'd felt about pouring my heart out to him dissipated and was replaced with a churning sensation deep in my gut. What if he truly didn't want to be with me anymore? What if I was the only one willing to fight for us? I didn't think I could survive another rejection from him. Not when my entire world began and ended with the man I hoped hadn't left campus yet.

Somehow, I mustered up the courage to propel myself forward, moving toward the department where his office was located and hoping to find out once and for all if he was going to be a part of my future like I wanted him to be.

Just as I'd hoped, he was sitting at his desk, working on his laptop.

"Hey." My voice echoed through the space despite my attempt to be quiet.

Hayden's head snapped up. "What are you doing here?"

"You got a minute?"

The muscles in his neck moved as he swallowed hard. "Um ... yeah. C'mon in."

I closed the door behind me, and a pang of disappointment stabbed me in the chest when he didn't immediately stand to meet me in the center of the room. Trying to stave off my nervousness, I ran a hand over my face. "I wasn't sure if you'd be here, but I'm glad you are. Can we talk?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Why not? You aren't my professor anymore." I threw his words from earlier back at him. "Isn't that what we've been waiting for?"

He let out a long sigh. "Things are different now."

"No, they're not." I frowned.

"You'll be traveling the world for the next six months. A lot can change in that time. Maybe when you're done—"

“I didn’t take the job.”

He reared back. “What?”

My decision had been made weeks ago. I’d wanted to tell him right away, but with him insisting we needed to keep our distance because the dean was watching him, I had known I needed to be patient if I really wanted him to hear me. The wait had been torturous, but it would be worth it if we managed to find our way back to each other. “I didn’t take the job,” I repeated.

“I don’t understand. That’s your dream.”

I shook my head. “That’s what you’ve been saying, but you’re wrong. My dream is to be with you.”

He stared at me, his eyes turning glassy. “I can’t ask you to stay here for me. That wouldn’t be fair to you.”

I rounded the corner of his desk and kneeled in front of him, placing my hands on his thighs. “Do you still want to be with me?”

“Of course I do,” he whispered.

“Then you need to understand that you’re not asking me to do anything. I’m following my heart, and it’s telling me this is where I belong.”

He looked at my hands resting on his legs. “I don’t want you to regret your choice later on and walk away.”

His words hit me hard. The entire time I thought he was only worried about how I felt, but I hadn’t considered he was scared of losing me if I felt resentment for putting him first. I took a deep breath, hoping what I said next would eliminate his remaining doubt. “Music journalism is something I enjoy and want to do, but I can do that anywhere. A great job would mean nothing to me if I wasn’t truly happy with my life. And my life would be empty if all I had was work and not the person I love.”

A tear slipped down his cheek, and he cupped my face with his hands. “I love you too.”

“Then don’t make me live without you.”

“Okay.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips against mine.

“The last month has been miserable without you.”

He trailed his lips down my neck. “It’s been miserable for me too. I missed you so much.”

I palmed his hard cock through his dress pants. “I missed you, too. Don’t ever leave me again.”

He leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss against my lips. “I won’t.”

A few minutes passed as we enjoyed the simple contact we’d denied each other during our time apart, but it wasn’t enough. The desire to feel every inch of the man I was head over heels for overwhelmed me.

I reached for his belt. “I need you.”

“Tyler,” he murmured against my sensitive skin. “Someone might come in here.”

“I’ll lock the door.”

While I walked over and flipped the lock, Hayden made quick work of his pants and opened the side drawer of his desk.

“I don’t have lube but I do have some Vaseline.” He grabbed the little jar before tossing it on the desk.

“Vaseline? Why?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. It wasn’t the best option, but we didn’t have much choice since I didn’t want to wait a second longer for him to take me.

He pulled out his wallet. “My lips get chapped sometimes. Now are you going to keep talking with that smart mouth or are you going to let me bend you over this desk?”

“Oh, the desk sounds better.” Even though the door was locked, the fact someone could walk by and hear us added an extra rush, and my heart raced with anticipation. I slid my pants down to my ankles before I braced my forearms on top of the oak desk.

“I’m not going to get to tease you like I want to,” he said, moving behind me. “We’ll save that for tonight when I can take my time worshiping your body. Right now, I’m going to feel every bit of your greedy little asshole. Let you know how much I love you. How much you’re mine.”

If I could come just from his words, I would have been a sloppy mess on the floor.

The sound of a condom wrapper being ripped open filled my ears and I turned my head to see Hayden dip his fingers into the Vaseline.

“Spread those legs for me, baby,” he murmured, his tip grazing my hole.

I moaned and tilted my hips back giving him better access.

“You’re going to have to keep that smart mouth quiet while I fuck you. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” I breathed as he filled my ass to the hilt.

He leaned over my back so he could capture my mouth with his. I poured every emotion into the kiss. Showing him how much I loved him and how grateful I was that we found our way back to each other.

When he stood upright, he increased his speed and I gave into the pleasure he was providing. My moans echoed through the office as I pushed against him, forcing him to hit that spot deep inside me. My spine tingled with my impending release, and I reached down to stroke my shaft.

“That’s it, I want you to come at the same time as me,” he groaned into my ear.

His words sent me tumbling over the edge, and I clenched around him. He came with a growl, at the same time my warm cum spurted all over the tiled floor.

Hayden slid out of me and grabbed some tissues, handing a couple to me. While he took care of the condom, I cleaned myself and wiped up the mess I’d made.

I wanted to stay in that moment as long as we could, but we were on borrowed time.

As I pulled up my pants, I asked, “Come to dinner with me and my family?”

“Are you sure?” He buttoned his slacks.

I nodded. “It was always the plan for you to go with me, and I’m tired of hiding. Aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am.” He placed a soft kiss on my lips. “When are you supposed to meet them?”

“About now,” I chuckled as I checked the time on my phone.

“Great,” he muttered. “Not exactly the impression I want to make when being introduced as your boyfriend—late and rumpled.”

“Don’t worry about it. After I tell them I’m not moving back to California and don’t have a job, they’ll forget about us being late.” I gave him a teasing grin.

He rolled his eyes. “You’re not really selling me on the idea of joining you, but I do think I can help on the job front.”

I lifted a brow. “How?”

“A few internships opened up at *The Hub*. I think you’d have a decent chance of scoring one.” He winked.

“And you didn’t think to tell me this earlier?”

“I didn’t want you to settle for something that wouldn’t make you happy just to be with me.”

“Hayden—”

He wrapped his arms around me. “I realize now that I was wrong. It should have always been your choice to make. I’m so sorry.”

The heavy sadness that had weighed me down over the last several weeks lifted with his apology. “Thank you for that. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

HAYDEN LACED HIS FINGERS WITH MINE AS WE WALKED toward the restaurant. “So, who all are we having dinner with?”

“Basically, everyone you saw me with earlier at graduation: my dads, plus Jamie and her husband, Tony. Then there are my brothers, Dylan and Jase, and my sister, Cammie. Oh, and my grandparents too.”

He laughed. “I have no idea how I’ll remember everybody’s names.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage.” I gave him a quick peck on the cheek as we stood in front of the Italian restaurant. “You ready?”

He nodded. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

When we stepped inside, the rich aroma of herbs and spices had my stomach rumbling. Or maybe it was because I’d worked up an appetite in Hayden’s office.

“Good evening,” the hostess greeted. “Table for two?”

“Actually, we’re part of the Statler-Matthewson party. I’m pretty sure everyone else is already here.”

She looked down at the notes in front of her. “Oh, yes. They’ve already been seated in our private room. Please follow me, and I’ll take you back.”

We walked behind her, our hands still joined as she led us through the busy dining room. She stopped at the open doorway of the reserved space and peeked inside.

“It looks like you need another chair, I’ll have someone bring one over. Enjoy your dinner.”

When my parents were making reservations for my celebratory dinner, they’d asked if I was bringing anyone with me. I was pretty sure they’d been hinting to meet my boyfriend since I’d promised them they could meet him at graduation. But at the time, Hayden and I were broken up so I

told them I'd be on my own. Thankfully, they hadn't pushed for more information.

"Let's do this." I squeezed Hayden's fingers gently, and he smiled in return.

We stepped inside to a chorus of cheers and shouts of congratulations, but as quickly as it started, it came to an abrupt halt as everyone's eyes fell to where I held onto Hayden.

"Tyler." My dad narrowed his eyes. "What's going on?"

I swallowed hard. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend, Hayden."

The room stayed quiet as they continued to stare. Cammie was the first to break the silence. "You're dating your professor?"

"He's not my professor anymore," I pointed out.

The busser came in and placed another chair next to the only open one. I led Hayden over and we took the seats across from my dads.

"Well, Hayden, let me introduce you to several people you haven't officially met yet." Chase went around the table and introduced everyone.

"It's nice to meet you all," Hayden said to the group and then turned to my father. "I'm sure this comes as a huge surprise."

"You can say that again," Dylan whispered with a chuckle, and I elbowed him in the ribs.

"Is this some sort of joke?" my dad asked. "Because I gotta say I don't find it funny at all."

"Gage," Chase muttered. "I'm sure Tyler can explain."

I gave Chase a small smile before answering. "It's not a joke. Hayden and I are together."

Dad glared at Hayden. "So, you don't think it's a problem to be dating a student? Is this something you do often?"

“Dad, stop.”

“It’s okay.” Hayden squeezed my leg under the table and responded to my father, “I’m sure I’d be asking the same thing if I was in your position. I understand this looks bad.” I huffed, but he continued. “I’ve never dated a student before. In fact, I didn’t know Tyler was in my class when we first met. After we found out I was his teacher, we tried to keep our distance, but we couldn’t deny our feelings for each other.”

“I think it’s great,” Jamie piped up, causing both of my dads to gape at her.

“You think it’s great that he took advantage of his position and pursued our son?” Dad countered.

I threw my hands in the air. “He didn’t take advantage of anything. I love him.”

“You do?” Chase asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. He’s the best thing to ever happen to me.”

“I love him too,” Hayden acknowledged to everyone, but his gaze never left mine.

“That’s so sweet,” my grandmother gushed at Hayden. “Tyler’s grandfather and I met in college too.”

“Mom, that’s not the same thing. Hayden isn’t a student,” Dad argued.

Grandma shrugged. “Semantics.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. I loved my grandmother.

“I still don’t like it,” my dad grumbled, his arms crossed over his chest.

“They’re consenting adults,” Jamie reasoned. “I’m sure if you give it some time, you’ll realize how lucky Tyler is to have found someone who obviously cares about him. It’s what we want for all our kids.”

“I’m the lucky one,” Hayden replied.

Before anyone else could say anything, our server came in. Hayden and I looked over the menus as he took everyone else's order first. When he left, Hayden turned his attention to my dad again.

“Mr. Statler, I'm going to order a drink at the bar. Want to join me?”

I tilted my head. “What are you doing? You could have ordered a drink here.”

Hayden shrugged. “I think a private chat with your dad might be good.”

My pulse raced as I waited for my father to answer.

“Sure, I could use another drink,” Dad replied.

Once they stepped away, Jase barked out a laugh. “Dude, this has been entertaining.”

“Jase, knock it off,” Chase admonished.

Thankfully, conversations about topics other than my love life picked up around the table. In all fairness, my dad's reaction hadn't been unexpected. He was protective of all of us, and as a teacher himself, a professor having a relationship with a student went against his code of conduct. However, as Jamie pointed out, we were adults capable of making our own decisions, unlike the high school students my father taught. Hayden and I knew the truth about our relationship. We knew he didn't take advantage of his power or show me any sort of favoritism—well, except for the after hours lectures I loved so much.

Hayden and Dad returned from the bar at the same time as our server brought out our food. They both appeared a bit more relaxed than they had been when they left, which eased some of the tension coiled tightly inside me.

“Everything okay?” I asked under my breath.

Hayden draped his arm across the back of my chair. “Yeah. I just thought your dad might be a little understanding if I explained a few things.”

“Like what?”

“We can talk about that later.”

I wanted to push for more information, but I could wait until we were alone. Instead, I took a bite of my chicken piccata, savoring the lemony flavor as it burst across my tongue. Hayden nudged me with his foot when I let out a small moan of appreciation.

“Behave yourself,” he whispered.

I gave him a wide grin. “What? It’s delicious.”

He shook his head, and I laughed.

“So, are you two going to do the long-distance thing while you’re on tour with *Flirting with Fire*?” Chase asked, drawing us out of our playful moment.

That topic was another thing I’d been anxious to discuss, but I couldn’t avoid it. I wiped my mouth with my napkin and replied, “About that. I turned their offer down.”

“Seriously?” Dylan questioned. “You’ve been a fan of theirs for years. I thought you’d drop everything to hit the road with them.”

“I know, but I’ve thought long and hard about it, and I really like living here. I can see making the East Coast my home.”

“What are you going to do for a job?” Dad inquired.

“It turns out there’s a couple of openings at the media company that Hayden’s family owns, so I think I’ll give that a try.”

“It sounds like you have a plan, and as long as you’re happy, we’ll support you,” Chase said, and my father nodded.

“Does that mean we don’t have to help you pack tomorrow?” Jase asked hopefully.

“No.” I rolled my eyes. “I still have to move out of the frat house, but Fallon has an extra bedroom at his new condo in Boston, and he offered to let me stay there.”

The rest of dinner was filled with lighter conversations, and everyone seemed to enjoy themselves, even my father.

Later, while we all stood on the sidewalk and said our goodbyes, Jamie wrapped her arms around me and whispered, “I’m happy for you, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I squeezed her tight. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She smiled as she took a step back.

“We’ll be at your place bright and early.” Dad hugged me and then, much to my surprise, clapped Hayden on the shoulder and asked, “Will we see you tomorrow?”

“I’ll be there.”

After we parted ways with my family, I gripped the back of Hayden’s neck and pulled him in for a searing kiss right there on the sidewalk where anyone could see. His tongue traced my lips before slipping inside my mouth. Several seconds passed as we lost ourselves in a passionate embrace.

“I’ve wanted to do that for a long time,” I said breathlessly as we broke apart.

“Me too.” He trailed a finger down the side of my face. “And I can’t wait to do it every day.”

EPILOGUE

HAYDEN

ONE MONTH LATER ...

CHARLOTTE WAS GETTING MARRIED ON NARRAGANSETT BAY near Newport, Rhode Island. She'd wanted to go to the lighthouse in Maine where Mitch had proposed, but they could have only had the ceremony there and not the reception. Her guests would have had to travel thirty minutes to a golf club, so to avoid multiple locations, she found another lighthouse with a historic inn next to it that was perfect for her wedding.

After much debating, she'd hired a photographer despite me telling her I wouldn't mind doing it.

"You'll be with your boyfriend. Have a good time. I don't want you working," she'd stated.

I'd stopped arguing with her because the thought of walking hand in hand into the venue with Tyler was everything I ever wanted. Well, almost everything. I had a few questions for him I needed answers to, and the backdrop was hopefully the best place for them.

Since we'd gotten back together, everything had been perfect. There was no more hiding, no more feeling like I needed to look over my shoulder, and no more fear that someone would rat out our forbidden romance. We strolled

farmers' markets, ate out at restaurants, and we even went to a movie where we shared a bucket of popcorn and a large soda. I hadn't realized how much joy the little things in life could bring, until I became free to be myself with the man I loved. I was truly the happiest I'd ever been.

Tyler was offered the internship at *The Hub*. We didn't hide the fact that we were a couple. Hell, my parents had met while working there many moons ago, so an in-office romance wasn't frowned upon. Besides, Tyler wasn't working in my department. While I was the section editor for the sports department, he was assisting the lifestyle section editor.

In the week he had been interning, he'd helped cover a story for Pride Month and he'd been tasked with coming up with a list of some of the best LGBTQ+ songs for the year. It wasn't the same as covering a story for Flirting with Fire or another big name band just yet, but he'd get there. Maybe it wouldn't happen while he was working at *The Hub*, but for now, we were both satisfied with our relationship and being out in the open. Whatever the future held for us, I knew we'd conquer it together.

"Ready?" I asked him as I straightened the cuffs on my suit jacket. I'd just come back from the gift shop where I had to pick up a few items.

He walked over to me and gave me a little kiss. "Now I'm ready."

Slipping my camera over my neck, I opened the door to our private cottage at the inn and grabbed Tyler's hand. We walked down the path toward where the ceremony was being held and I took pictures to commemorate the occasion. Even though I wasn't the official photographer, I was still going to give Charlotte the ones I took because she could never have too many of her special day.

It was a mild evening, one that would turn chilly once the sun set in a few hours, but I didn't think we'd notice since we were going to be dancing the night away under a sailcloth tent. Would we get married one day too? The thought crossed my mind as we walked toward the grassy area where white chairs

were set up and overlooking the bay. It was too soon for me to propose, but that didn't mean I didn't want to. However, seeing all the flowers and guests arriving in their formal attire made me want to drop to one knee and ask Tyler right there on Charlotte's big day. But I would never do that to her, so I kept quiet as we took our seats and waited for the ceremony to begin.

Tyler slid his phone from his slacks and opened it to the camera. We leaned in and he snapped a selfie of us. A few seconds later, my phone buzzed. I pulled it out of my pocket to see that he had tagged me in a post on social media. Opening the notification, it went to the selfie and the caption read: *The best is yet to come.*

"I like your caption," I told him.

"I didn't really know what to say. Maybe I should have gone with, 'I'm here for the cake'."

"Nah, it's perfect."

"You think so?"

"I do, and you'll see why later."

Tyler opened his mouth to respond, but the music started to play, signaling us to stand because Charlotte was on her way. I put my face up to the viewfinder of my camera and snapped picture after picture of her.

Her hand was wrapped around her father's arm, her flowy white dress blowing in the wind as she walked toward us. She was stunning, and if I didn't know any better, I would have also said she was glowing.

Charlotte walked down the aisle, her father gave Mitch his blessing, and then the two said 'I do' before going to take pictures with their official photographer. I took a few myself as they walked by, kissing and smiling and enjoying the moment of finally being husband and wife.

"Walk with me?" I asked Tyler.

"Sure."

I led him away from the festivities. “We have some time before they return from taking pictures. I want to get a few shots of the bay.”

“Of course.”

Walking together, we made our way toward the lighthouse. I knew Charlotte had picked the venue because of the beacon and I would be fast, so we wouldn’t interfere with her pictures.

“I know we have these in California, but I can honestly say I’ve never seen a lighthouse in person,” Tyler stated.

“They’re pretty neat,” I said. “But they also symbolize hope and security because they guide sailors safely to land.”

“Ah, yeah. That makes sense.”

I pulled a key from my pocket, a lighthouse on the keychain that I’d picked up in the gift shop. “I was hoping this lighthouse could lead to your home.”

Tyler raised a brow. “My home?”

“I know you live with Fallon, but I was wondering if maybe you’d want to move in with me?”

His eyes widened. “Really?”

“Only if—”

“Shut up and kiss me.” He grabbed my face and planted his mouth on mine.

“Is that a yes?”

“That’s a hell yes.”

I grinned and kissed him again. “I have another question too.”

“Okay. What is it?”

I didn’t step back. Instead, I hooked my arms around his neck and asked, “Want to go to Paris?”

Tyler threw his head back and chuckled. “Will we take pictures of the Eiffel Tower at night?”

My smile widened, and I said, “You know, sometimes really great things come from breaking the rules.”

The End.

Fallon is getting his story in *Secrets We Fight*

Coop and Ford are getting a story in *Hooking the Captain*

Add them both to your TBR!

If you haven't had a chance to read Chase and Gage's story,
read *Dibs* now!

Sign up for Kimberly & Rachel's Newsletter [here](#).

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Off the Field Duet – A MM Baseball Romance

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where love always wins

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